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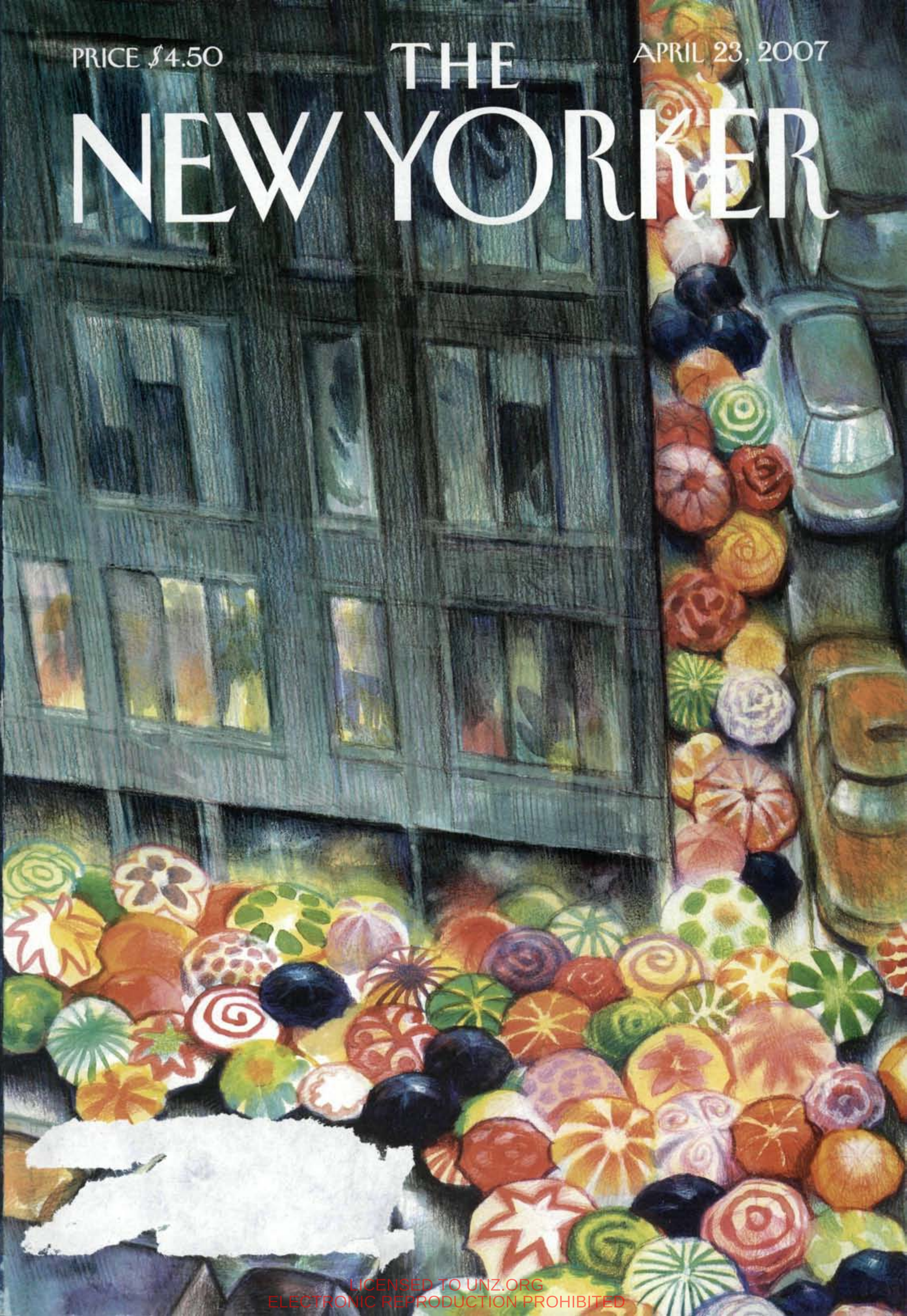

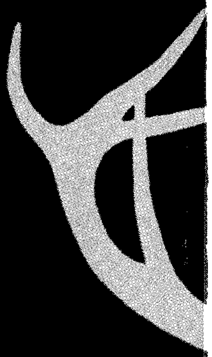

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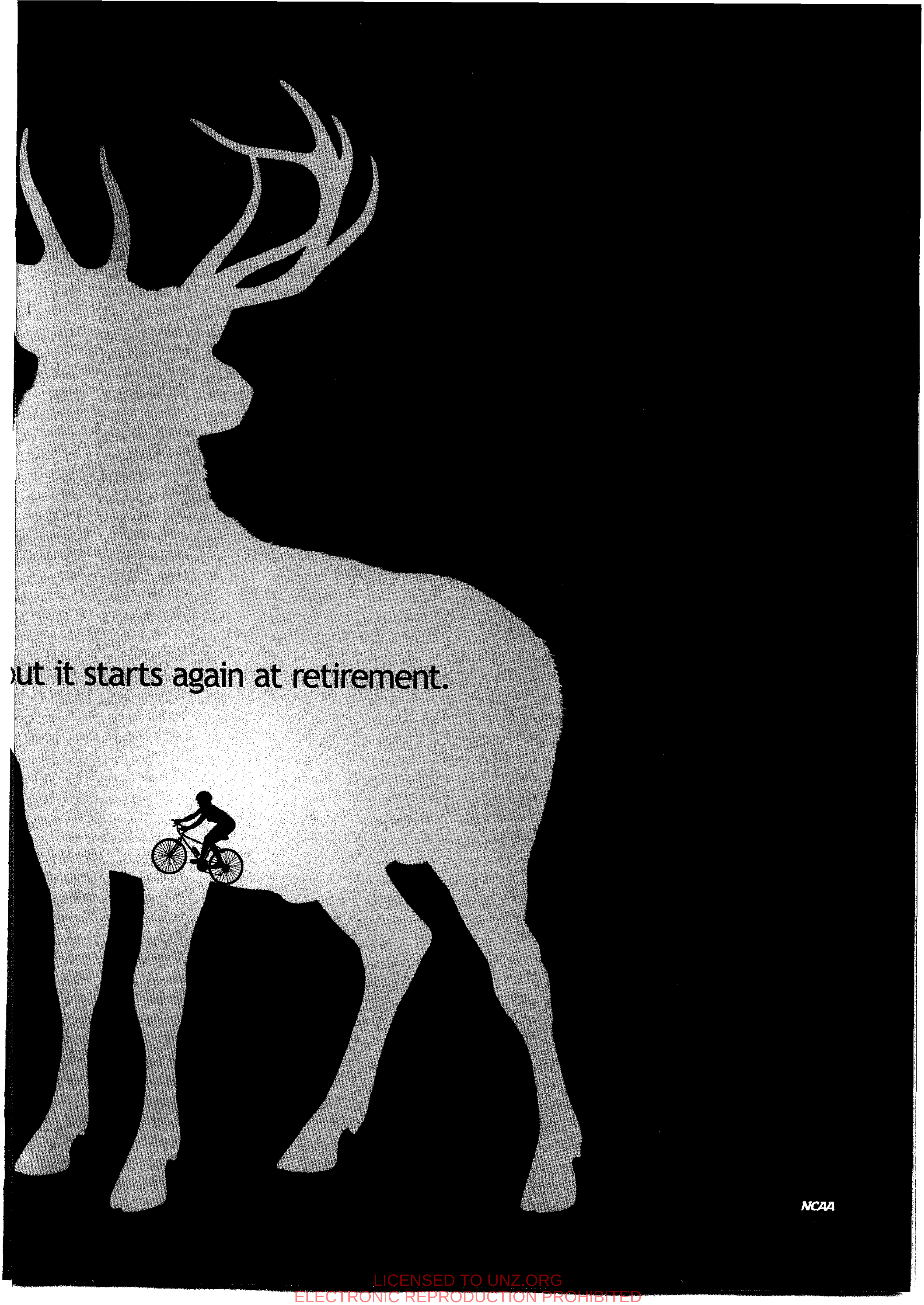
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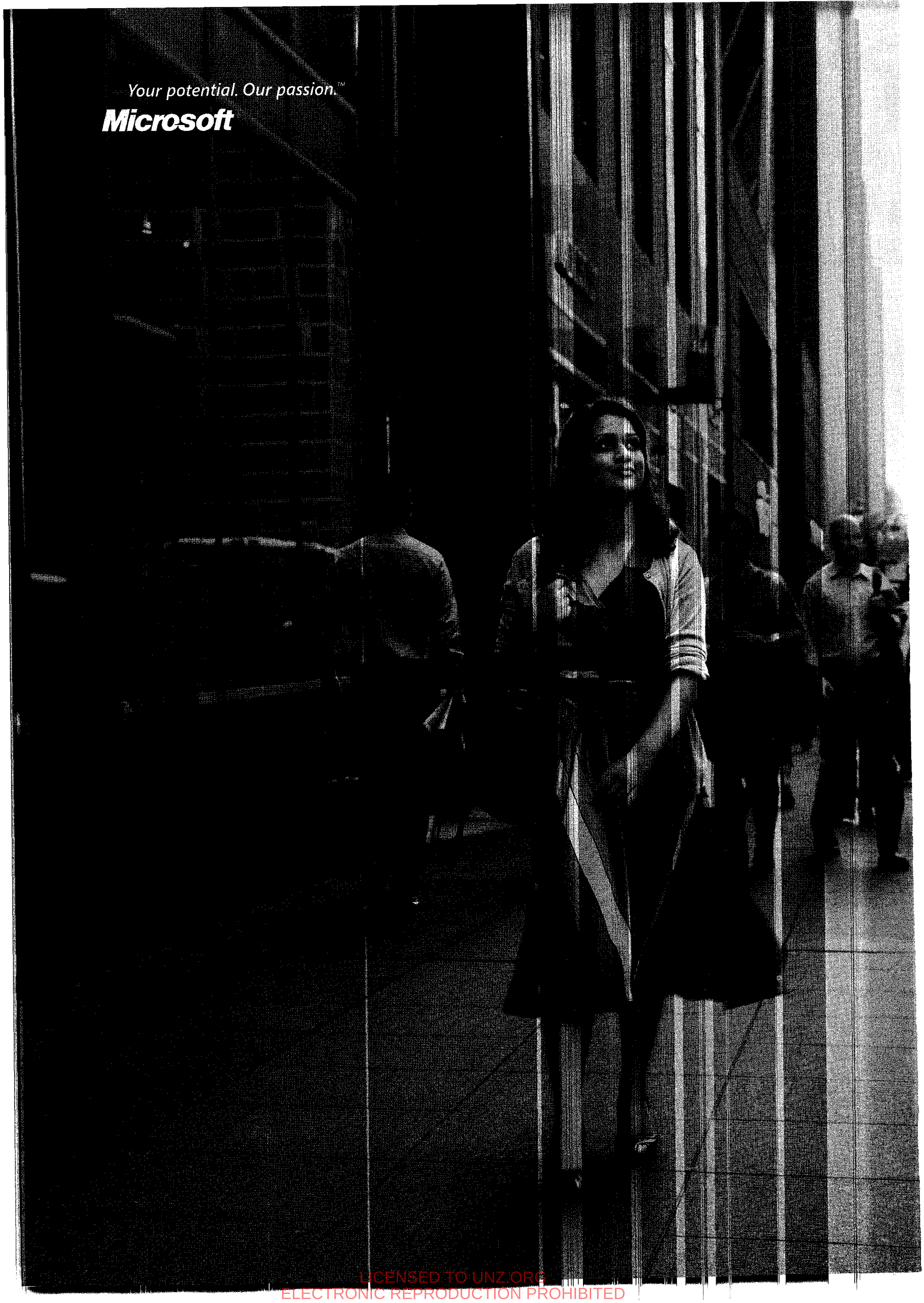
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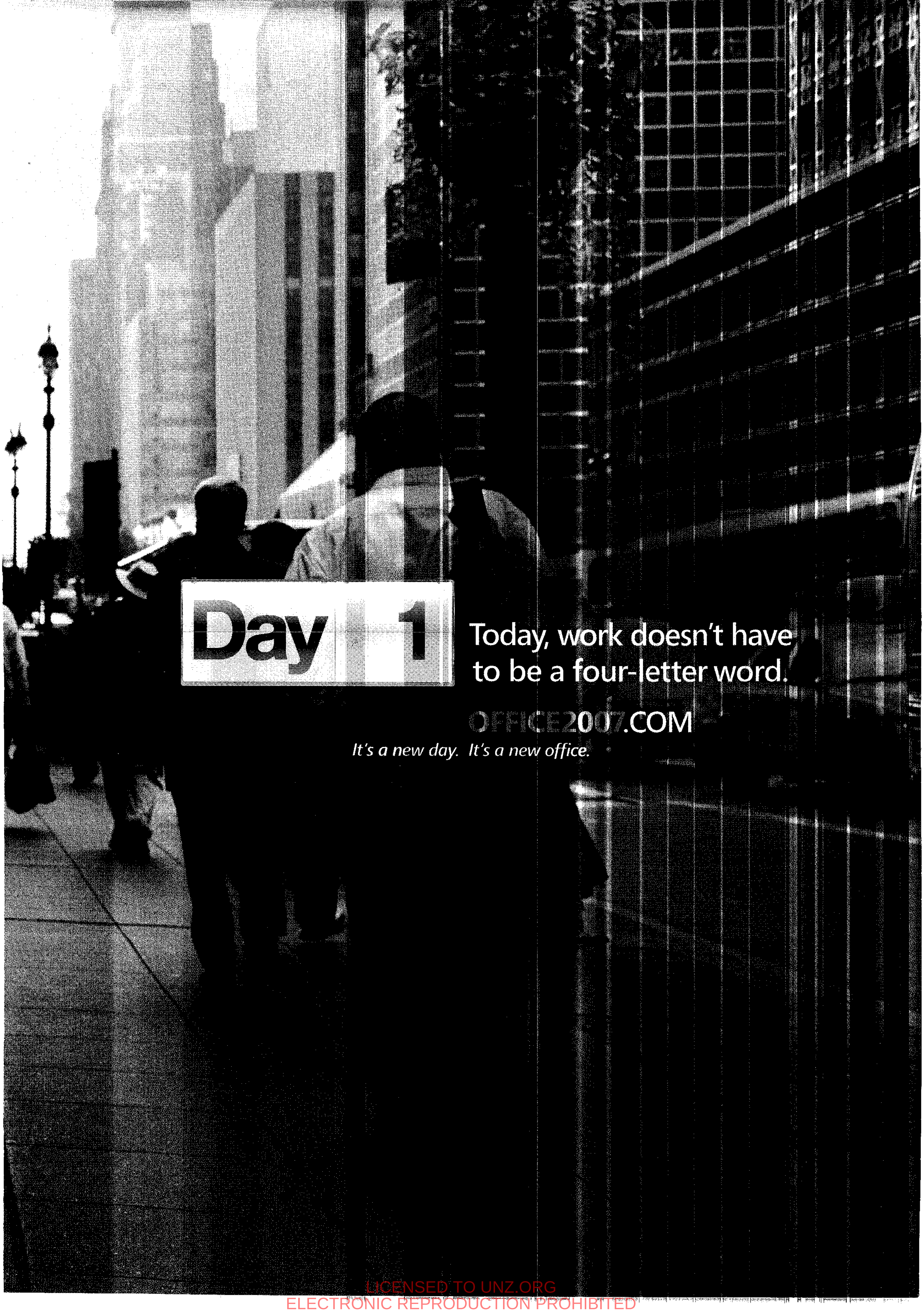
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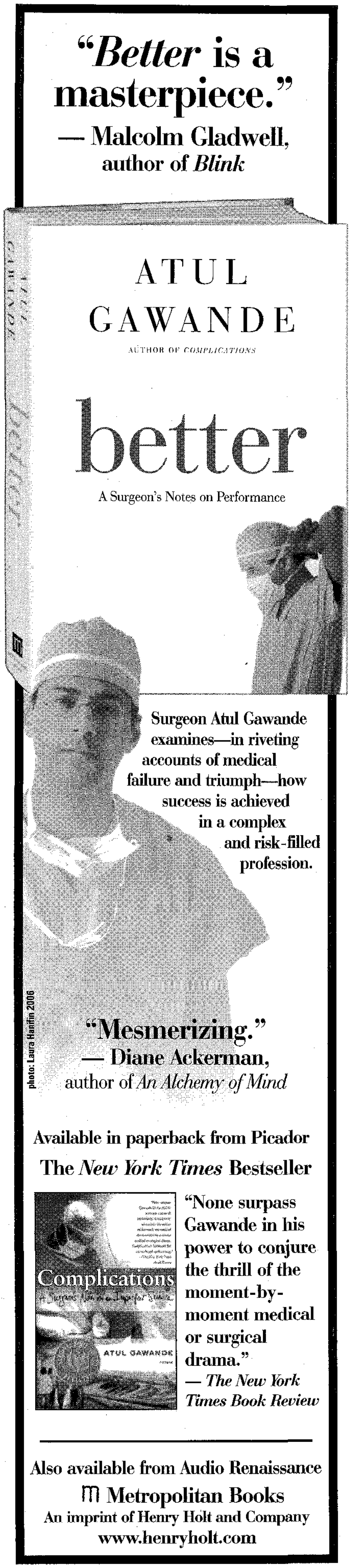

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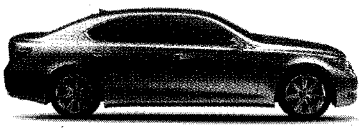

On April 17th, the Sundance Channel launches a new original series, "Big Ideas for a Small Planet," exclusively sponsored by Lexus. This thirteen-part documentary series presents innovative designers, products, and processes that are on the front lines of a new green world. Not the least of which is the Lexus LS 600h L—the world's first full-hybrid V8 long-wheelbase sedan. With ultra-low emissions, abundant legroom, and a sumptuous leather-trimmed cabin, it's proof that we can be conscious of the earth's needs while fulfilling our own. This groundbreaking vehicle will arrive in June.

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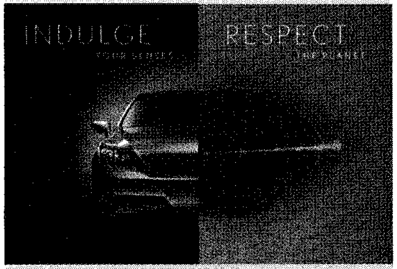


LEXUS

CONTRIBUTORS

Jane Kramer ("Round One," p. 30) writes the Letter from Europe for the magazine. Her most recent books are "Lone Patriot" and "The Politics of Memory."

Nick Paumgarten (Comment, p. 25) has been writing for the magazine since 2000.

Ben McGrath ("Waiting for Manny," p. 38) is a staff writer.

Jean Valentine (Poem, p. 43) received the 2004 National Book Award for "Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems, 1965-2003." She will publish her eleventh book of poems, "Little Boat," in October.

Lauren Collins (The Talk of the Town, p. 29) is the deputy editor of The Talk of the Town.

J. D. McClatchy (Poem, p. 52) has published five books of poetry, including "Hazmat." His edition of Thornton Wilder's collected plays and writings on theatre was published in March.

Carter Goodrich (Cover), an illustrator, published his first children's book, "A Creature Was Stirring: One Boy's Night Before Christmas," last year.

Jianying Zha ("Enemy of the State," p.46) has published one book in English, "China Pop." Among her books in Chinese is "The Nineteen-Eighties," which came out last year and has won several book awards in China.

Calvin Tomkins ("The Turnaround Artist," p. 58) writes about art and cultural affairs for the magazine. His books include "Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg."

John Burnside (Fiction, p. 68) is a poet and novelist. He has a memoir, "A Lie About My Father," coming out in May, and a novel, "The Devil's Footprints," early next year.

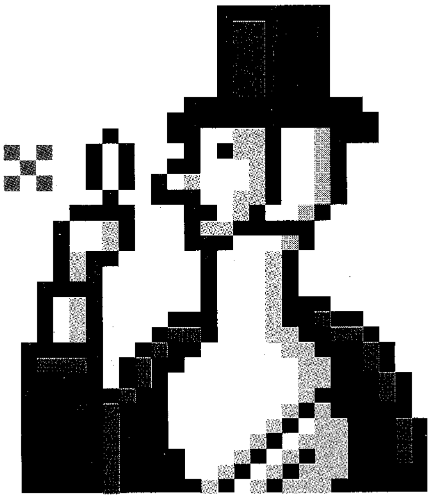
Adam Gopnik (Books, p. 78), a staff writer, has published three books, including "Through the Children's Gate: A Home in New York."

William Logan (Poem, p. 72) is a poet and critic. His books include "The Whispering Gallery" and "The Undiscovered Country: Poetry in the Age of Tin," which won the 2005 National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism.

Hilton Als (The Theatre, p. 84) is a theatre critic for the magazine. He is the author of "The Women."

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

James Surowiecki weighs in on complaints about the Conrad Black trial and other corporate prosecutions. / *Ben McGrath* takes readers' questions about Manny Ramirez and the new baseball season. / *Dan Baum* shops for alligator, and more daily dispatches from New Orleans./ A slide show of art by Jeff Koons. / From the archives: *Ken Auletta* on Don Imus, *Calvin Tomkins* on Koons's fiftieth birthday, *John Updike* on Kurt Vonnegut, and more. / A selection of articles from the current issue. / Video versions of animated cartoons; the caption contest; and a list of *New Yorker* events across the country.



THE MAIL

LATER EINSTEIN

John Updike, in his review of Walter Isaacson's new biography of Albert Einstein, writes that after Einstein won the Nobel Prize in Physics, in 1921, "he never again made a significant contribution to the ongoing life of the physical sciences" (Books, April 2nd). On the contrary: in the nineteen-twenties, Einstein was instrumental in arranging for the publication of S. N. Bose's paper describing a new type of statistics that were applied to photons. These came to be called Bose-Einstein statistics, and they are the basis of coherent optics, for which Roy Glauber, of Harvard University, won the Nobel Prize, in 2005. Einstein went further: he realized that the same statistics would apply to atoms of zero spin (such as He^4) and predicted the phenomenon now called Bose-Einstein condensation. This was observed experimentally at the University of Colorado in 1995, and in 2001 Eric Cornell, Wolfgang Ketterle, and Carl Wieman were awarded the Nobel Prize for this discovery. Einstein also made an important contribution to the foundations of quantum mechanics in a 1935 paper with Boris Podolsky and Nathan Rosen, work that has remained at the forefront of the study of physics and has been, until recently, a matter of vigorous debate. Einstein did so much, and created so many new concepts in physics, that he easily could have been awarded seven or eight Nobel Prizes had the selection committees been so inclined.

Paul F. Zweifel
University Distinguished Professor, Emeritus
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Radford, Va.

SELLING VIRTUE

Jeffrey Goldberg, in his piece on the new marketing strategies of Wal-Mart, quotes Leslie Dach, the company's executive vice-president for corporate affairs and government relations, as saying, "We're one of the only companies to support an increase in the federal minimum wage" ("Selling Wal-Mart," April 2nd). This should be understood, much like the chain's drive to "green" its stores, less as a social agenda than as a self-interested strategic move. Wal-Mart's business model is the delivery of inexpensive, mostly Chinese-manufactured goods, to impoverished rural America. As that market gets saturated, Wal-Mart has two options: (a) find new markets, but, as the store has discovered, it may be difficult to sell cheap Chinese products in rural China; or (b) boost consumption in existing markets by increasing the disposable income of rural America through an increase in the minimum wage.

Akshay R. Rao
General Mills Professor of Marketing
Carlson School of Management
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Minn.

Carl Pope, the executive director of the Sierra Club, treats Wal-Mart's initiative to cut its energy consumption warily, saying, "But it's a straight-out business call." He goes on, "You can't be a good progressive and support Wal-Mart because [it] is saving money on energy—that's all they've done so far." But surely anyone who favors conservation must acknowledge that a unit of energy profitably conserved by Wal-Mart is equivalent to a unit of energy conserved by, say, a legion of pious Prius owners. The environment, after all, doesn't find one unit of conservation morally superior to another based on the financial burden borne by the conserver. If motives matter more than results, then Pope is leading not a practical movement but a moral one.

Kevin Bon
Ottawa, Ontario

•

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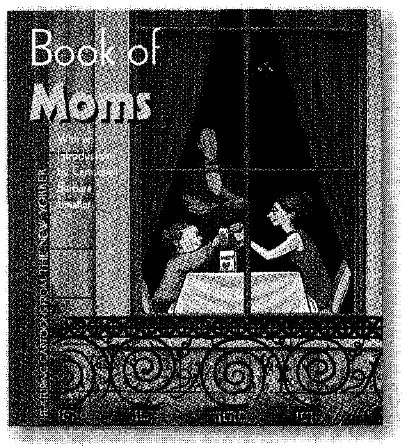
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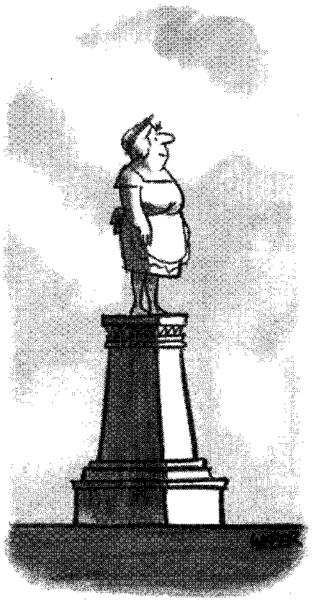

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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22	23	24	18	19	20	21

THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
LOTTE LIEBE

Manhattan Theatre Club presents the world première of "LoveMusik," a musical about the relationship between the German composer Kurt Weill and his wife and muse, Lotte Lenya, whom he married twice. The show features music and lyrics by Weill and a book by Alfred Uhry. (See page 10.)

NIGHT LIFE
UNCOMMON PEOPLE

It's been a little more than a decade since Jarvis Cocker's smart, cheeky pop band, Pulp, first landed at the top of the British charts, but Cocker's acerbic wit and his talent for memorable hooks remain sharp. He has a snappy début solo release, "Jarvis," and two shows at Webster Hall. (See page 12.)

ART
FLOWER POWER

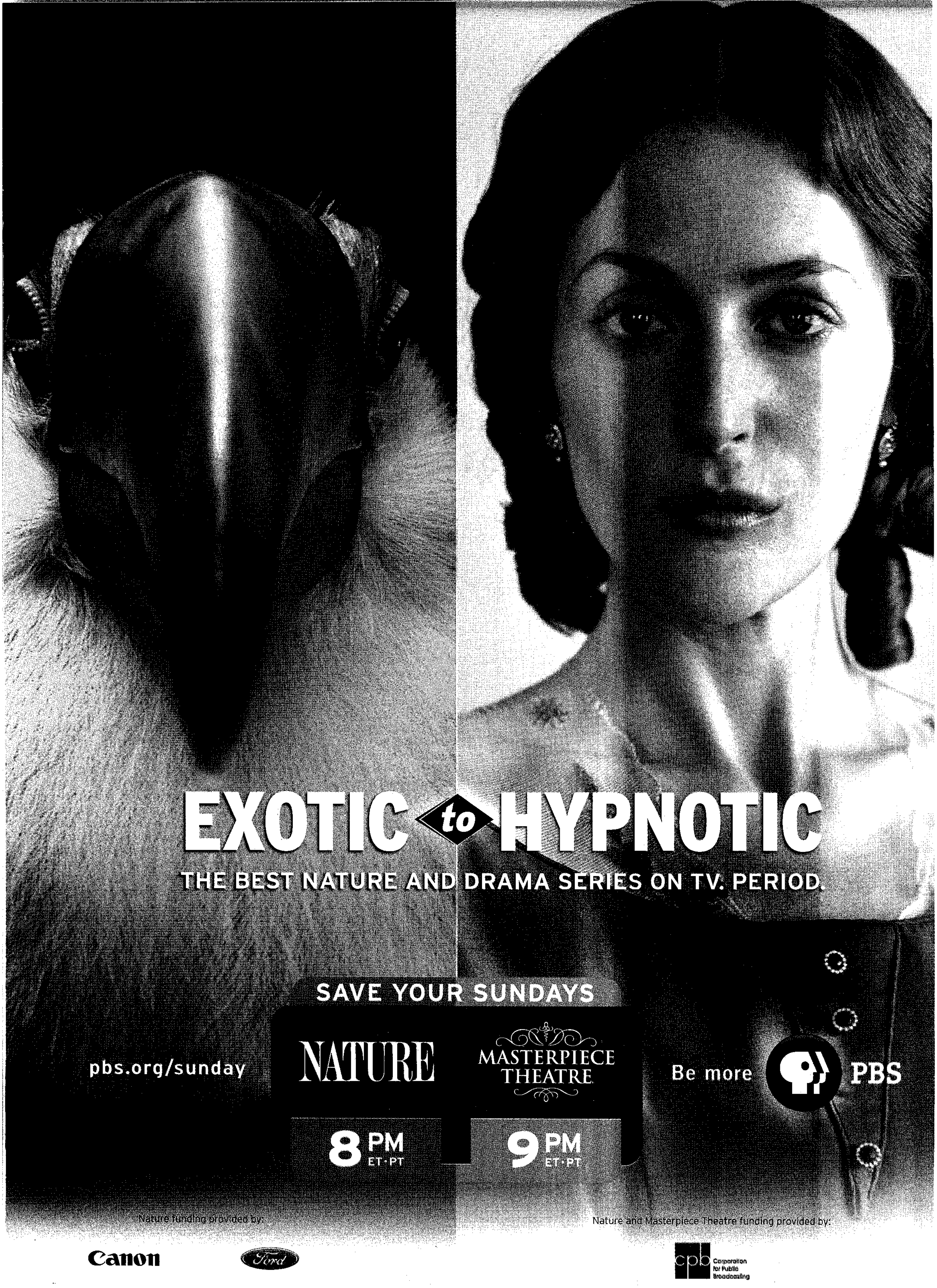
James Welling has been making photograms (cameraless photographs) of plumbago blossoms silhouetted against stark backgrounds for a few years now; examples of these radiantly colored images are at both the Horticultural Society (two-tone works from 2005) and Zwirner (multi-tone pieces from 2006). (See pages 14 and 15.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
TRIPLE THREAT

"Il Trittico," Puccini's most ambitious work, is a series of three vivid one-act operas that the Metropolitan Opera premièred in 1918. The three pieces—"Il Tabarro," "Suor Angelica," and "Gianni Schicchi"—were intended to be performed as a set but are sometimes broken apart. The full "Trittico" returns in a new production by the director Jack O'Brien, conducted by James Levine. (See page 16.)

MOVIES
A DAY'S WORK

The documentary "West of the Tracks," made by Wang Bing in a decaying Chinese industrial city, runs more than nine hours. Wang's intense, probing images suggest a hunger for truth; his subjects talk about domestic abuse, gambling, and their hatred of the military police. Anthology Film Archives screens it in three parts. (See page 20.)



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THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

AMERICAN FIESTA
Mark Brokaw directs this drama, about a Fiestaware collector from a conservative family, written by and starring Steven Tomlinson. In previews. (Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303.)

BIOGRAPHY
The Pearl presents S. N. Behrman's 1932 comedy, about a Manhattan artist who causes a rumpus with the announcement of her revealing autobiography. In previews. Opens April 22. (80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.)

THE BRIG
The Living Theatre inaugurates its new performance space with a production of the 1963 play by Kenneth H. Brown, about atrocities committed in military prisons during the Korean War. Judith Malina directs. In previews. (19-21 Clinton St. 212-352-3101.)

CORAM BOY
Helen Edmundson adapts Jamila Gavin's novel, about two orphans in eighteenth-century England. Melly Still directs the National Theatre production. In previews. (Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

DEUCE
Angela Lansbury and Marian Seldes star in Terrence McNally's new play, in which champion tennis doubles partners reunite. Michael Blakemore directs. In previews. (Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

DIXIE'S TUPPERWARE PARTY
Dixie Longate, a drag performer who became Tupperware's top salesperson, tells her story, in a play directed by Alex Timbers and written by Kris Andersson and Elizabeth Meriwether. In previews. (Ars Nova, 511 W. 54th St. 212-868-4444.)

FROST/NIXON
Frank Langella and Michael Sheen star in the Donmar Warehouse production of Peter Morgan's drama, based on the taped conversations between David Frost and Richard Nixon in 1977. In previews. Opens April 22. (Bernard B. Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

110 IN THE SHADE
Roundabout Theatre Company's production of the musical by Harvey Schmidt, Tom Jones, and N. Richard Nash. Audra McDonald stars; Lonny Price directs. In previews. (Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-239-6200.)

I LAND
Ma-Yi Theatre Company presents Keo Woolford in a one-man show about Hawaiian identity and hula dancing, with choreography by Rokafella and Robert Cazimero. Previews begin April 20. (Culture Project, 55 Mercer St. 212-352-3101.)

JANE EYRE
The Acting Company presents a stage adaptation of Charlotte Brontë's masterpiece from 1847. Preview on April 23. Opens April 24. (Rose Nagelberg, 55 Lexington Ave. 212-279-4200.)

THE J.A.P. SHOW, JEWISH AMERICAN PRINCESSES OF COMEDY
Cory Kahaney, Jackie Hoffman, Cathy Ladman, and Jessica Kirson pay homage to their comedic forebears. Opens April 18. (Actors Temple Theatre, 339 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

LEGALLY BLONDE THE MUSICAL
A musical adaptation of the Reese Witherspoon film, about a sorority girl who ends up at Harvard Law School. Directed and choreographed by Jerry Mitchell. In previews. (Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 212-307-4100.)

LOVEMUSIK
Michael Cerveris and Donna Murphy star in this musical, which chronicles the romance of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya. With songs by Weill and a book by Alfred Uhry. Directed by Harold Prince. In previews. (Biltmore, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

MACBETH
Chicago Shakespeare Theatre teams up with Milan's Colla Marionette Company to present a children's version of the tragedy, told with puppets. Opens April 20. (New Victory, 229 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

THE PRESIDENT AND HER MISTRESS
Abingdon Theatre Company presents the première of Jan Buttram's futuristic comedy, set in 2156, about a woman who must defend her Presidency. Rob Urbinati directs. In previews. (312 W. 36th St. 212-868-4444.)

RADIO GOLF
The final installment of August Wilson's ten-play cycle set in Pittsburgh's Hill District is about an African-American politician's rise to prominence in 1997. Harry Lennix and Tonya Pinkins star; Kenny Leon directs. Previews begin April 20. (Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

SMOKE AND MIRRORS
The première of a play by Joseph Goodrich, which follows a group of employees in the break room of their workplace. Nick Faust directs. In previews. (Flea, 41 White St. 212-352-3101.)

NOW PLAYING

THE ACCOMPLICES
The veteran *Times* reporter Bernard Weinraub's first play is a dry talking biography of Hillel Kook, a man of charm and fire who came to America from Palestine in 1940, under the name Peter Bergson, and became a leading agitator for the aid of European Jews. It's a story whose moral stance is unambiguous, and Weinraub tells it with minimal dramatic imagination. Here is Bergson (Daniel Sauli) appealing to Rabbi Stephen Wise (David Margulies), the figurehead of the docile Jewish establishment; there he is with F.D.R. (Jon DeVries), pleading for the admittance of refugees. Weinraub offers not a living history but a pageant of complacency, staged in a style as gray as smudged newsprint. (Acorn, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

ALL THE WRONG REASONS
John Fugelsang performs a one-man show about drug smuggling, neo-Nazis, and his Catholic upbringing. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-239-6200.)

ARMED AND NAKED IN AMERICA
Naked Angels presents a series of plays centered on American life during wartime, by playwrights including David Rabe, Warren Leight, and Will Eno. (The Duke on 42nd Street, 229 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. Through April 22.)

BLACKBIRD
Jeff Daniels and Alison Pill star in a play by David Harrower. (Reviewed in this issue.) (City Center, Stage I, at 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

EXITS AND ENTRANCES
Athol Fugard's eloquent memory play is a meditative two-hander about the theatre and what it means to be both king of it and prisoner within it—an actor's actor, or, for that matter, a writer's writer, locked within a dream of grandeur that's temporary at best. Just as the new Republic of South Africa is being born, in 1961, a gifted classical actor of the previous generation, André Huguenet (Fugard's first mentor), has died. The Playwright (a vigorous William Dennis Hurley) recalls Huguenet (the acid-tongued Morlan Higgins) as he was five years earlier, rehearsing "Oedipus the King," when Fugard worked as his dresser. Though Huguenet struggled with his lines and a recalcitrant toga, he had the clarity of artistic self-knowledge. Their dialogue captures both men's barbed and generous stubbornness—and the loneliness of their art. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

IN DARFUR
The Public Theatre presents a developmental production of a play by Winter Miller, directed by Joanna Settle, that examines the crisis in Darfur. (425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

INHERIT THE WIND
Christopher Plummer and Brian Dennehy star in Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's dramatic retelling of the Scopes trial. (Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

IRENE
Musicals Tonight! concludes its season celebrating the career of George S. Irving with this 1973 musical. (McGinn/Cazale, 2162 Broadway, at 76th St. 212-868-4444.)

TABLES FOR TWO
THE E.U.

235 E. 4th St. (212-254-2900)—This new restaurant, in the East Village, seems an improbable underdog. When plans for the restaurant were announced, it appeared likely to be an instant success. Its owners, Bob Giraldi and Jason Hennings, were veterans of the New York restaurant scene (BREAD-Tribeca and August, respectively); the chef, Anne Burrell, had worked with Mario Batali; and AvroKo, the coolly intellectual design team behind Public and Stanton Social, signed on to do the interiors. But then residents in the neighborhood, which has become the hipsters' answer to the meatpacking district, reacted with hostility to the idea of yet another pub, and the State Liquor Authority rejected the owners' petition for a liquor license. Burrell left before the place even opened; after limping along for a few weeks—they tried making it as a B.Y.O.B., but the cops shut that down after one day—the E.U. closed.

When the license finally arrived and the restaurant reopened, the hiccups didn't end: chefs came and went, the kitchen had technical problems. But, as in any good fable, perseverance triumphed over adversity. In January, Akhtar Nawab, formerly of Craft and Craftbar, took over the kitchen, and Eater.com drew back from putting the E.U. on its Deathwatch (a fairly reliable indicator of a restaurant's eventual demise). There are no lines out the door, but on a recent evening many of the ninety-six seats were filled, and the sense of imminent doom seemed to have lifted. Perhaps its only lingering effect is the staff's palpable eagerness to please.

Like the décor—rough-hewn wood planks for a ceiling, exposed brick and dark leather, cupboards full of foodstuffs, shelving above the bar stocked with cookbooks and china—the menu is rustically sophisticated. There's a vegetable pot pie, burgers (German, with liverwurst; English, with Cheddar; and Italian, with pancetta), a well-curated charcuterie plate. Some things transcend their humble appellations: "chicken and dumplings" turns out to be airy spinach-and-ricotta *malfatti* and terrifically moist poultry. At brunch, when the front wall of windows lets in a flood of sunlight on even the gloomiest spring morning, scrambled eggs, golden and delicate, are accompanied by a hearty ragout laden with hen-of-the-woods mushrooms. It would take a hard heart (or stomach) not to be won over. (Open daily for lunch and dinner and weekends for brunch. Entrées $16-$24.)

—Andrea Thompson

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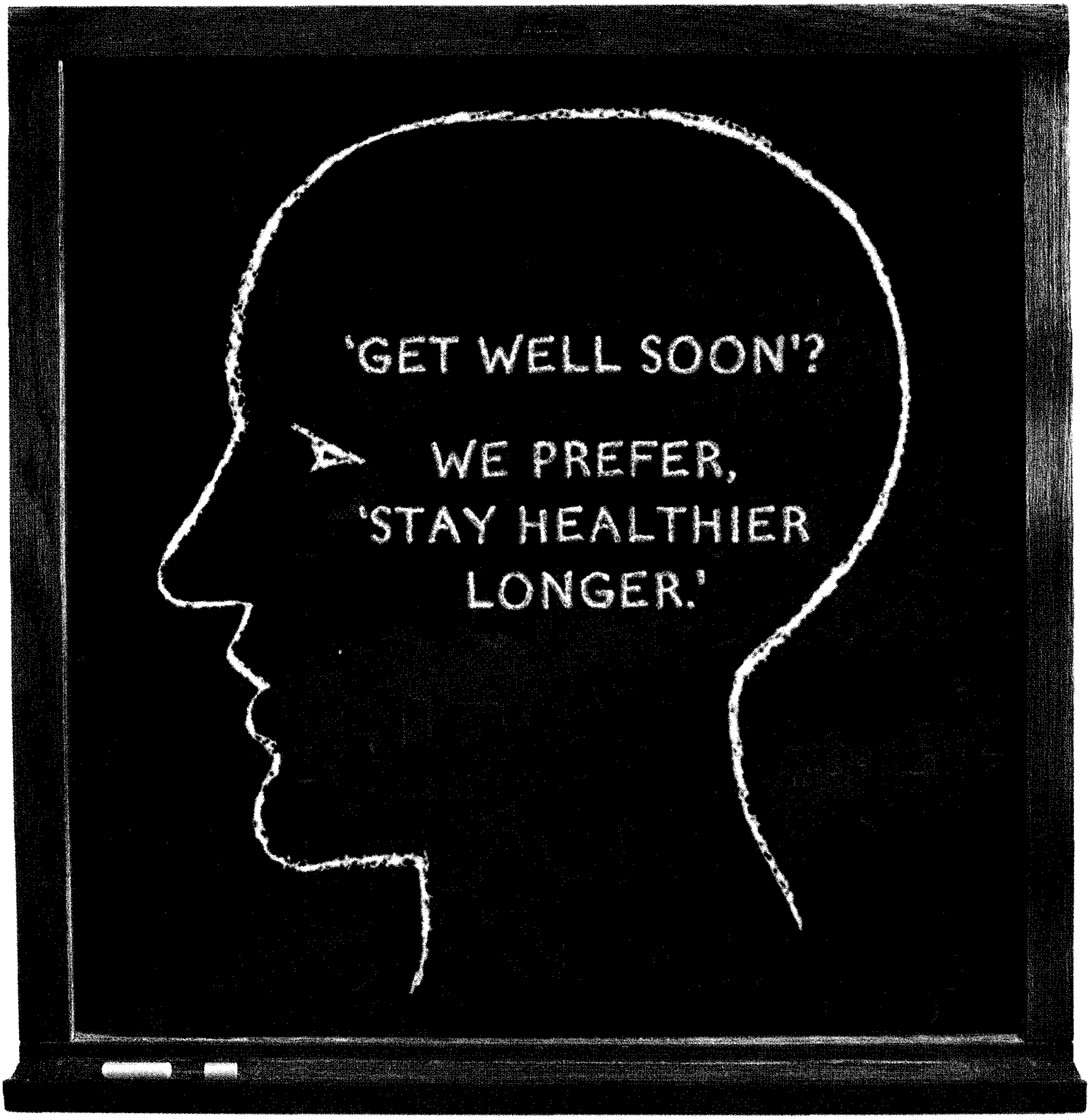

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A MOON FOR THE MISBEGOTTEN
The Old Vic's revival of Eugene O'Neill's romantic drama. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 212-307-4100.)

REARVIEWMIRROR
Three figures sit facing the audience, narrating their interlocking stories by turns. Agatha (Audrey Lynn Weston) went to Israel to find herself as an Orthodox Jew, only to be dragged home by her skeptical American family. She wants to be caught up in something fervent and messianic, while Penn (Mark Alhadeff), an aspiring screenwriter, is just as keen for a disciple. Agatha and Penn seem like a match made in neurasthenic heaven—until she strays from his side to join a rock cult, and Inez (the wily Sarah Nina Hayon), a Hasidic woman, arrives to take her place. Eric Winick's characters are more eccentric than credible, though Carl Forsman's tight direction helps them keep the wheels turning onstage. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. Through April 22.)

TRANSFIGURES
Women's Project presents a play conceived and directed by Lear deBessonet, in which tourists in Israel fall into religious delusions, a phenomenon known as the Jerusalem syndrome. (Julia Miles, 424 W. 55th St. 212-239-6200.)

WAXING WEST
In Saviana Stanescu's darkly comic play, a long white table provides a literal platform for the turbulent journey of Daniela (Marnye Young), a Bucharest rebel in a bright silk head scarf who leaves her screaming, post-Communist country behind to make a marriage of convenience in America—only to wind up as a cook and mistress for a computer nerd whose amorous penchants involve poultry and plastic cutlery. While the Ceaușescus—both Nicolae and Elena—rise from their graves, vampire style, to delight in Daniela's American humiliations and seductions, she tries to make a home for herself in New York. There's spleen and surrealistic fancy in the play's construction, and Benjamin Mosse shows a flair for the unexpected in his elevated staging. (La Mama E.T.C., 74A E. 4th St. 212-475-7710. Through April 22.)

Also Playing

THE COAST OF UTOPIA: Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200. **COMPANY:** Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. **CURTAINS:** Al Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **DEFENDER OF THE FAITH:** Irish Repertory, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737. **GREY GARDENS:** Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **HOWARD KATZ:** Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. **IN THE HEIGHTS:** 37 Arts, 450 W. 37th St. 212-307-4100. **JACK GOES BOATING:** Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. **KING HEDLEY II:** Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. Through April 22. **PRELUDE TO A KISS:** American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300. **SOME MEN:** Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422. Through April 22. **SPRING AWAKENING:** Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **TALK RADIO:** Longacre, 220 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING:** Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

ANGEL ORENSANZ CENTER FOR THE ARTS
172 Norfolk St. (866-468-7619)—In 1962, when few outlets were open to avant-garde and independent filmmakers, a group of them formed the Film-Makers' Cooperative to help distribute their work. (In their initial statement, they wrote, "We don't want false, polished, slick films—we prefer them rough, unpolished, but alive; we don't want rosy films—we want them the color of blood.") On April 23, **Philip Glass,** the **Bill Frisell** trio, the **Clogs,** and others perform while experimental gems—including Harry Smith's "Abstractions" and Bill Morrison's "The Mesmerist"—are screened. **Jonas Mekas,** one of the co-op's founders, will accompany his own films on vocals and with the band **Now We Are Here.** A benefit.

Chuck Brown pays a visit to Joe's Pub this week.

BAM CAFÉ
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4139)—April 20: The local group **Pistolera,** which is led by the guitarist and singer Sandra Lilia Velásquez, includes a propulsive accordionist named Maria Elena, a drummer named Ani Cordero (who is Velásquez's cousin, and was once in the colorful rock band Man or Astro-man?), and one guy, the bassist Inca B. Satz. The foot-stomping band favors the fashions of the Mexican Revolution and has a winning sound that's equal parts ranchera and indie pop.

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—April 19: **Salif Keita,** the Malian singer who first achieved renown with the folk-rumba group Les Ambassadeurs, has become one of West Africa's most popular musical exports. The opening act is the guitarist and vocalist **Leni Stern,** a New Yorker who is just back from Bamako, where she recorded her latest EP, "Alu Mayé (Have You Heard)," at Keita's studio. April 23: **Todd Rundgren.** Following a successful career in the sixties, seventies, and eighties as a singer-songwriter, both as a solo artist and with his bands Nazz and Utopia, Rundgren went on to become a cult figure in the nineties as a producer with an interest in new technologies. Last year, he returned to the spotlight as the front man for the most recent incarnation of the eighties rockers the Cars.

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—April 18: **Ghostland Observatory,** a long-haired electro-dance duo from Austin, Texas, is known for kinetic performances. April 19: **Balkan Beat Box,** the world-wandering electronic-music ensemble created by the saxophonist Ori Kaplan and the drummer and producer Tamir Muskat.

GREEN APPLE MUSIC & ARTS FESTIVAL
This earth-friendly event, which is now in its second year, runs April 20-22 and includes a free concert in Central Park with the children's entertainer **Laurie Berkner.** Also performing are the folksingers **Tom Paxton** and **Richard Shindell,** at the Society for Ethical Culture; the American Idol **Taylor Hicks,** at the Beacon Theatre; and **Jake Shimabukuro** (see Joe's Pub). (For a complete schedule, visit www.greenapplefestival.com.)

JOE'S PUB
425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—April 19: The Washington, D.C., guitarist and singer **Chuck Brown,** who is known as the godfather of go-go. As the leading ambassador of that bottom-heavy funk subgenre, he's carrying on his mission with a new album, "We're About the Business." He's in his seventies, but he knows how to party like a teen-ager. April 20: **Jake Shimabukuro,** a spiky-haired ukulele wunderkind from Hawaii, became a phenomenon last year, thanks in part to a video of him playing George Harrison's "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" in Central Park, which, via YouTube, was seen around the world.

"LET'S ZYDECO"
The concert series, dedicated to the various indigenous musical forms of Louisiana, has arranged for a visit by **Rosie Ledet,** a young female accordionist and bandleader, who is a rarity in the male-dominated zydeco world. She doesn't get up this way very often, but she's at Connolly's with her band, the Zydeco Playboys, on April 22. (121 W. 45th St. For more information, call 212-685-7597 or visit www.letszydeco.com.)

PIANOS
158 Ludlow St. (212-505-3733)—April 19: **Fruitkey,** a band from France that rocks with smooth élan, is the latest creation of the American artist, cellist, and vocalist Jason Glasser (who plays guitar here), formerly of Clem Snide and Champale.

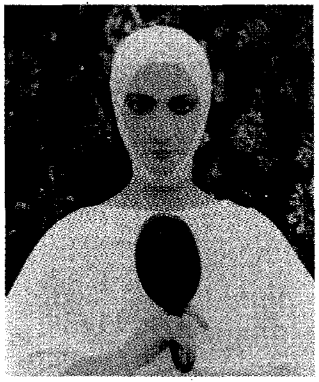
WARSAW
261 Driggs Ave., Brooklyn (718-387-0505)—April 20: The sisters Sierra and Bianca Casady, who record and perform under the name **CocoRosie,** have a raw vocal style that evokes early female blues singers. They favor dreamy arrangements and sparse accompaniment on guitar, piano, or less conventional instruments. (They've used broken toys, gold-chain belts, and other objects one might find in the back of one's closet.) This show marks the release of their new album, "The Adventures of Ghosthorse and Stillborn."

WEBSTER HALL
125 E. 11th St. (212-353-1600)—April 22-23: As the front man for the longtime Brit-pop stalwarts Pulp, **Jarvis Cocker** crafted smart music that was as intimately confessional as it was catchy and danceable. Since those heady days, a decade or so ago, he's been involved with a variety of projects, including the soundtrack for "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire." (He also appears briefly in the movie.) He's relocated to Paris, married, become a father, and, recently, finished his first

LEFT: JEROEN KOOLHAAS; RIGHT: BARON ADOLF DE MEYER

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
ON THE BLOCK

There's a wealth of terrific photography shows in the city's museums and galleries right now, but they'll have tough competition this week from the sprawling exhibitions that auction houses mount in advance of their spring sales. Every



house has something to brag about—a virtual Horst retrospective at Christie's, "27 Exceptional Photographs" at Phillips—but Sotheby's exhibition of works from the collection of Margaret Weston promises to be the smartest show in town. Weston, who opened her Carmel, California, gallery in 1975, shortly after her divorce from Edward Weston's son Cole and long before there was an active market for her wares, is not merely a connoisseur. Her collection is full of extraordinary images by Weston, Cunningham, Evans, Man Ray, and other modernist masters, but it ranges marvellously wide, embracing everything from Carleton Watkins's log-cabin landscape to Wanda Wulz's Futurist still-life. Unlike many contemporary collections, Weston's is not just savvy; it's soulful—and bracingly, pointedly idiosyncratic.

—*Vince Aletti*

solo album, "Jarvis." On it he comes off as a bit of a curmudgeon, but this is one case in which being ill-tempered sounds fantastic.

WORLD MUSIC INSTITUTE
April 20: A night of meditative Chinese court music with the **Gang-a-tsui Nanguan Music Ensemble,** from Taiwan. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. For more information, call 212-545-7536.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—April 17-May 12: **Karen Akers,** a living symbol of cabaret at its most elegant, salutes Jule Styne, the composer of the Broadway shows "Gypsy," "Funny Girl," and "Bells Are Ringing," along with a number of enduring popular songs.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—April 17-22: A double bill of multicultural jazz, from the prodigious Israeli bassist **Avishai Cohen,** and keyboard pyrotechnics, from the Japanese pianist **Hiromi.**

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—The contentious and brilliant bassist, composer, and bandleader Charles Mingus would have been eighty-five this April. A salute to the great man, running from April 17 to April 22, features appearances by the seven-piece **Mingus Dynasty,** on the first and last nights; the ten-member **Mingus Orchestra,** on April 18 and April 19; and the fourteen-piece **Mingus Big Band,** on April 20 and April 21.

JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER
Broadway at 60th St. (212-721-6500)—April 20-21: The "Singers Over Manhattan" series brings **Dianne Reeves** to the Allen Room. With greatly increased visibility as a result of her performance in the film "Good Night, and Good Luck," from 2005, and her subsequent Grammy for the film's soundtrack, Reeves takes her place in the public eye as a jazz singer to be contended with.

JAZZ GALLERY
290 Hudson St., near Spring St. (212-242-1063)—A slew of creative improvisers hold forth here this week, beginning on April 18 with the saxophonist **Sam Newsome** and the Romanian pianist **Lucian Ban.** They are followed, on April 19, by the guitarist **Mike Moreno** and his sextet, featuring the saxophonists **John Ellis** and **Marcus Strickland.** The drummer **Leon Parker** stops by on April 20. The next evening, the guitarist **David Gilmore** brings in his quintet, which is anchored by the drummer **Jeff (Tain) Watts.**

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—April 17-22: The Cuban pianist **Gonzalo Rubalcaba** has evolved from a speed-demon virtuoso to a meditative improviser. His quintet features the trumpeter **Michael Rodriguez,** with whom Rubalcaba worked so well in Charlie Haden's ensemble Land of the Sun.

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—April 20: The pianist **Renee Rosnes,** who came of age supporting Joe Henderson and other heavyweight saxophonists, has a formidable tenor player, **Walter Weiskopf,** in her quartet here. The master drummer **Victor Lewis** and the bassist **Todd Coolman** round out the group.

THE STONE
Ave. C at 2nd St. (no phone)—April 21: The composer, woodwind player, and vocalist **Jessica Lurie** leads an eponymous ensemble in original folk and free-jazz compositions laced with Latin, Middle Eastern, and Eastern European grooves. (For more information, visit www.thestonenyc.com.)

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—April 17-22: The **Bill Frisell** sextet. By adding the clarinettist **Don Byron,** the trumpeter **Ron Miles,** and the violinist **Jenny Scheinmann** to his regular trio (which features the bassist **Tony Scherr** and the drummer **Kenny Wollesen**), the selflessly radiant guitarist gets a chance to exhibit his talent as an arranger. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—The Met's new, permanent Greek and Roman galleries open on April 20. ♦ Almost nine centuries of cultural and commercial exchange are documented in the exhibition **"Venice and the Islamic World, 828-1797."** From the start, the Venetians had an attitude of enthusiastic curiosity about the exotic arrivals in their port, dressing their doges in Ottoman brocades and decorating their homes and churches with imported carpets, glass, and metalwork. The tides carried influence both ways, and Murano glass, for instance, was favored by Mamluk sultans starting in the late fifteenth century. Efforts to profit from the intercontinental traffic were not always so successful: witness the sole surviving copy of a 1537-38 printing of the Koran, an ill-conceived project for a time when it was believed that the only respectful way to reproduce that book was by hand. (The introduction of typos only made things worse.) Scattered throughout the exhibit are exquisite maps of the partially known world; the uncertain coastlines and tiny flags indicating political loyalties underline the risk and romance of sea voyages in the years before military tensions increased and Venice finally fell to Napoleon. Through July 8. ♦ **"Barcelona and Modernity: Gaudí to Dalí."** Through June 3. ♦ **"Louis Comfort Tiffany and Laurelton Hall: An Artist's Country Estate."** Through May 20. ♦ **"Discovering Tutankhamun: The Photographs of Harry Burton."** Through April 29. ♦ **"One of a Kind: The Studio Craft Movement."** Through Sept. 3. ♦ **"Closed Circuit: Video and New Media at the Metropolitan."** Through April 29. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Artistic Collaborations: Fifty Years at Universal Limited Art Editions."** Through May 21. ♦ **"Live/Work: Performance Into Drawing."** Through May 21. ♦ **"Jeff Wall,"** a mid-career survey of the Canadian photographer's work. Through May 14. ♦ **"Comic Abstraction: Image Making, Image Breaking."** Through June 11. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"The Hugo Boss Prize 2006: Tacita Dean."** Through June 6. ♦ **"The Shapes of Space"** will open in stages throughout the summer, as restoration work on the Guggenheim's flagship building progresses. Among the works will be installations by Pipilotti Rist, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Piotr Ulanski that will carve new and disorienting shapes from the galleries and the rotunda. Through Sept. 5. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (800-944-8639)—**"Gordon Matta-Clark: You Are the Measure."** Matta-Clark is a tricky subject for history. He completed one hectic decade of mature work before dying, of cancer, at the age of thirty-five, in 1978. His major works—abandoned buildings cut into walk-in sculpture—have all been demolished. What remains are films, photocollages, drawings, and sculptural fragments of the building cuts. But, even in their capacity as remnants, these tell a vivid story of brash and savvy adventures in what Matta-Clark called "anarchitecture." Through June 3. ♦ **"Lorna Simpson."** Through May 6. ♦ **"Taryn Simon: An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar."** Through June 24. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

CHELSEA ART MUSEUM
556 W. 22nd St. (212-255-0719)—The artists in **"Dangerous Beauty"** contemplate modern societal obsessions—beauty, youth, thinness, unattain-

able perfection—through works in a variety of mediums. Among the participants are E. V. Day, Barbara Kruger, Ruud van Empel, Marilyn Minter, and Lauren Greenfield. Through April 21. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, noon to 6, and Thursday evenings until 8.)

DAHESH MUSEUM OF ART
580 Madison Ave., at 57th St. (212-759-0606)—**"Fantasy and Faith: The Art of Gustave Doré."** Through April 22. ♦ **"Napoleon on the Nile: Soldiers, Artists, and the Rediscovery of Egypt."** Through April 22. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 11 to 6.)

The horror thriller "Vacancy," directed by Nimród Antal and starring Kate Beckinsale and Luke Wilson, opens April 20.

RUTH GWILY

FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—**"George Stubbs (1724-1806): A Celebration."** Through May 27. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5.)

NATIONAL ACADEMY MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-369-4880)—**"High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975."** Through April 22. (Open Wednesdays and Thursdays, noon to 5, and Fridays through Sundays, 11 to 6.)

P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER
22-25 Jackson Ave., at 46th Ave., Long Island City (718-784-2084)—The artifice of plastic surgery is the touchstone of **"Silicone Valley,"** a show of works that "posit false realities." Corey D'Augustine's monochrome paintings made with everything from makeup to cooking fat represent the formalist vein; Marlene McCarty's drawings of nice-looking girls who've killed their parents, the realist one. Also here are Julian LaVerdiere's sculptural eagles made from squishy foam rubber, William Pope.L's creepy trophy corridor of animals covered in peanut butter and mayonnaise, and Peter Caine's animatronic sculpture of God. Extend it further, of course, and almost any art object could be seen as a "false reality." The breadth of that umbrella aside, the works in this show share an uneasy consideration of dogma in art and everyday life. Through May 7. ♦ **"Tom Sandberg: Photographs 1989-2006."** Through May 7. ♦ **"Jonas Mekas: The Beauty of Friends Being Together Quartet."** Through April 23. ♦ **"Not for Sale,"** a gathering of art that, for whatever reason, its makers would not consider converting into cash. The show includes work by Shahzia Sikander, Luis Gispert, Jasper Johns, and Stephen Shore, among others. Through April 30. ♦ **"Vik Muniz: Reflex."** Through May 7. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, noon to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Galleries are usually open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6; please call the gallery for exact hours.

LEE BONTECOU
A beguiling exhibition of vacuum-formed plastic sculptures of fish and flowers, all dating from the late sixties and early seventies. Bontecou has a spooky take on these potentially mundane subjects—some of the flowers wear gas masks, and the fish have the lantern jaws and scimitar teeth of the deepest sea-dwellers. The airy translucent plastic suits her sci-fi aesthetic, which is further detailed with a selection of graphite drawings, mostly on black paper. Through April 28. (Knoedler, 19 E. 70th St. 212-794-0550.)

REBECCA SMITH
Simple grids, made from lengths of steel bolted together and hung a few inches from the wall, are varied with off-kilter angles, twists, and uneven spacing. The sculptures at first evoke Manhattan street maps (in some cases the tidy avenues of the Upper East Side; in others the more tangled streets of the West Village) or Mondrians, but their deeper purpose is revealed through titles like "Laurentide Ice Sheet" and "Urumqi Glacier, China," and in the shades of ice- and sky-blue paint that Smith has applied to them. Global warming and environmental devastation are on her mind: these tough-minded formal pieces are vehicles for deeper ruminations on fast-changing geographies. Through April 28. (Freilich, 22 E. 72nd St. 212-794-5220.)

Short List

PIERRE BISMUTH: Boone, 745 Fifth Ave. 212-752-2992. Through April 28. **RALSTON CRAWFORD:** Zabriskie, 41 E. 57th St. 212-752-1223. Through April 21. **WILLIAM KLEIN:** Howard Greenberg, 41 E. 57th St. 212-334-0010. Through June 2. **THOMAS STRUTH:** Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160. Through April 28. **JAMES WELLING:** Horticultural Society of New York, 148 W. 37th St., 13th floor. 212-757-0915, ext. 113. Through June 29. **"PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE PRIVATE COLLECTION OF MARGARET W. WESTON":** Sotheby's, 1334 York Ave. 212-894-1149. Through April 25.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

ELGER ESSER
Even when they're entirely in focus, Esser's huge, handsome landscape photographs tend to minimize specifics in favor of atmosphere. Here, many of the most striking images were made as long exposures, so their subjects—usually seascapes under whiteout skies—blur like watercolors. Typically, Esser's color is also pale and washy, as if the picture has faded to subtle variations on one hue: yellow, cream, aqua, slate gray. Perhaps to balance this soft romanticism, Esser snaps back into focus for pictures of rivers with marshy or sylvan stretches that appear to be backlit; somehow light seeps through, bathing anonymous scrubland in golden, Old Master warmth. Through April 21. (Sonnabend, 536 W. 22nd St. 212-627-1018.)

TERESITA FERNÁNDEZ
This cool, spare show of sculpture unfolds into a subtle treatise on seeing and history. Fernández's signature wall pieces, composed of dozens of cabochons of colored glass, are here executed in shades of black and gray, and in a mirror-backed clear version that reflects the room upside down and in distorted miniature. They're impossible to take in all at once, both evocative (of clouds, screens, rain) and evasive. A polished-aluminum sculpture descends in flat, laser-cut frills from the ceiling, like graduated tree branches. The star is a six-by-ten-foot pane of shiny black fibreglass set in a drift of marble dust, a paean to the Claude glass, an optical device used by eighteenth-century landscape painters. Visitors to the gallery become small gray figures in a field of black, their contemporary context erased. Fernández's ongoing study of how we see what we see—the persistence of vision, the elisions that the eye and brain make—remains engrossing. Through April 28. (Lehmann Maupin, 540 W. 26th St. 212-255-2923.)

SPENCER FINCH
Art that uses poetry as a muse can get precious awfully quick, but Finch has done it successfully on multiple occasions. Emily Dickinson provides the show's title, "A Certain Slant of Light," but she isn't referenced elsewhere. Instead, a curved wall of computer-controlled fans re-create the breeze at Walden Pond. A bank of video screens turned toward the wall approximates the light in a Monument Valley hotel room at sunset. A grid

of Monet postcards with arrows pointing to colors and specifying times of day concretizes the fleeting experiences that Monet attempted to capture in paint. Poetry, in other words, is a subtext. But you could also say that Finch creates a visual analogue by heightening our perceptions of certain sounds and sensations. Through April 21. (Postmasters, 459 W. 19th St. 212-727-3323.)

VERA LUTTER

Lutter's large camera-obscura photographs, many of which stretch over three or four panels, have the lowering magnificence of sci-fi landscapes. Because she works with the negative rather than the positive image, her skies are pitch black and nearly everything else has a platinum shimmer. Owing to the necessarily long exposures, anything that moves turns spectral, including the venders in Venice's Piazza San Marco, which Lutter photographed both dry and partially flooded. If Venice's rooftops, façades, and canals represent the civilized, cultured world, Germany's coal-mining region is its brutal opposite. The enormous strip-mining machine that sprawls across Lutter's photographs is a cartoon of the military-industrial complex at its most malevolent. Through April 21. (Gagosian, 555 W. 24th St. 212-741-1111.)

JAMES WELLING

Welling, whose concept-driven photographs have ranged more widely than most, shows color work from three recent series. Photograms of plumbago flowers (other examples of which are at the Horticultural Society) fill the largest gallery here with lovely images of foliage so radiant that its already random colors melt. Pictures of broad-leafed succulents exposed repeatedly to different colored filters make for a rather academic exercise, but an even more didactic series—nine reworked pictures of drapery first shot in the nineteen-eighties—is drop-dead elegant. Printing the original images in negative gives them a solarized effect that's underscored by monochromatic, metallic coloring; the results might be details of future war memorials. Through May 5. (Zwirner, 525 W. 19th St. 212-727-2070.)

"NOTES ON UTOPIA"

Group shows made up largely of gallery artists can seem suspiciously convenient, but "Notes on Utopia" offers more to consider. The show takes its title from a Jonas Mekas video in which the artist, his face close to the camera, meditates on human progress. The Fluxus founder George Maciunas's history-charting drawings are complemented by Paula Scher's intricate, ruminating maps. David Byrne's funny word drawings examine the vagaries of contemporary culture, and a collage of skyscrapers and books crammed into a small-format painting by the Mexican muralist and social realist José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) is a piquant reminder of what it means to marry utopia with capitalism and industry. Through April 28. (Stendhal, 545 W. 20th St. 212-366-1549.)

Short List

PIERRE BISMUTH: Boone, 541 W. 24th St. 212-752-2929. Through April 28. **AMY CUTLER:** Tonkonow, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-255-8450. Through April 28. **WALTER DE MARIA:** Gagosian, 555 W. 24th St. 212-741-1111; and 522 W. 21st St. 212-741-1717. Through May 5. **KIM DINGLE:** Sperone Westwater, 415 W. 13th St. 212-999-7337. Through April 28. **ROSALYN DREXLER:** PaceWildenstein, 545 W. 22nd St. 212-989-4258. Through April 21. **CARROLL DUNHAM:** Gladstone, 515 W. 24th St. 212-206-9300. Through April 21. **SAM DURANT:** Cooper, 521 W. 21st St. 212-255-1105. Through April 28. **SEAN LANDERS:** Rosen, 525 W. 24th St. 212-627-6000. Through June 16. **MARY LUCIER:** Lennon, Weinberg, 514 W. 25th St. 212-941-0012. Through April 28. **JORGE PARDO:** Petzel, 537 W. 22nd St. 212-680-9467. Through April 21. **PHILIP PEARLSTEIN:** Cuningham, 541 W. 25th St. 212-242-2772. Through April 28. **DANA SCHUTZ:** Feuer, 530 W. 24th St. 212-989-7700. Through May 19. **JAMES TURRELL:** PaceWildenstein, 534 W. 25th St. 212-929-7000. Through April 28.

DANCE

LES BALLETS JAZZ DE MONTRÉAL

The venerable Canadian ensemble, recently refashioned in the up-to-date mode of international contemporary, returns to the Joyce with two full-company New York premières. In Rodrigo Pederneiras's "Mapa," the dancers take on the ballet-meets-Brazil aesthetic of the Grupo Corpo choreographer. In "Les Chambres des Jacques," they adopt a much more exciting aesthetic, inhabiting a strange world conjured by the wonderfully original Aszure Barton. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. April 17-18 at 7:30, April 19-20 at 8, April 21 at 2 and 8, and April 22 at 2 and 7:30.)

LAR LUBOVITCH DANCE COMPANY

The deeply lyrical choreographer brings his company to the Skirball Center, with a gala performance and two alternating programs, which include two new works. "Dvořák Serenade in E" is a richly layered piece for an ensemble of twelve, with two soloists (including the regal Drew Jacoby), which begins in silence, followed by waves of dancers rippling and flowing across the stage, in syntony with Dvořák's sweeping music for strings. "Little Rhapsodies" is a male trio set to music by Schumann, featuring Rasta Thomas. The second program offers a chance to see the Limón Dance Company in "Recordare," which Lubovitch made for it in 2005. (566 LaGuardia Pl. 212-279-4200. Program A: April 17-18 and April 21 at 8. Program B: April 19 at 8. Gala: April 20 at 8.)

THE NOTHING FESTIVAL

The downtown dance sage Tere O'Connor curates this eight-day festival, in which "all" that is asked of the eight participants is that they create a work with no preconceived notions, no narrative lens or value system. The choreographers, who include veterans like Douglas Dunn, Luciana Achugar, and Susan Rethorst and emerging figures such as Sam Kim and Walter Dundervill, will present their pieces at Dance Theatre Workshop, with post-show discussions moderated by O'Connor. (219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. April 18-21 at 7:30. For complete schedule, visit www.dtw.org.)

EIFMAN BALLET OF ST. PETERSBURG

In Boris Eifman's version of "The Seagull," Chekhov's tale of tortured theatre people becomes a struggle between an ambitious young choreographer and the established order of the dance world. The play within a play is a ballet in progress, set to a score built from bits of Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, and—gasp!—hip-hop. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. April 18-20 at 8, April 21 at 2 and 8, and April 22 at 2 and 7. Through April 29.)

AYNSLEY VANDENBROUCKE MOVEMENT GROUP

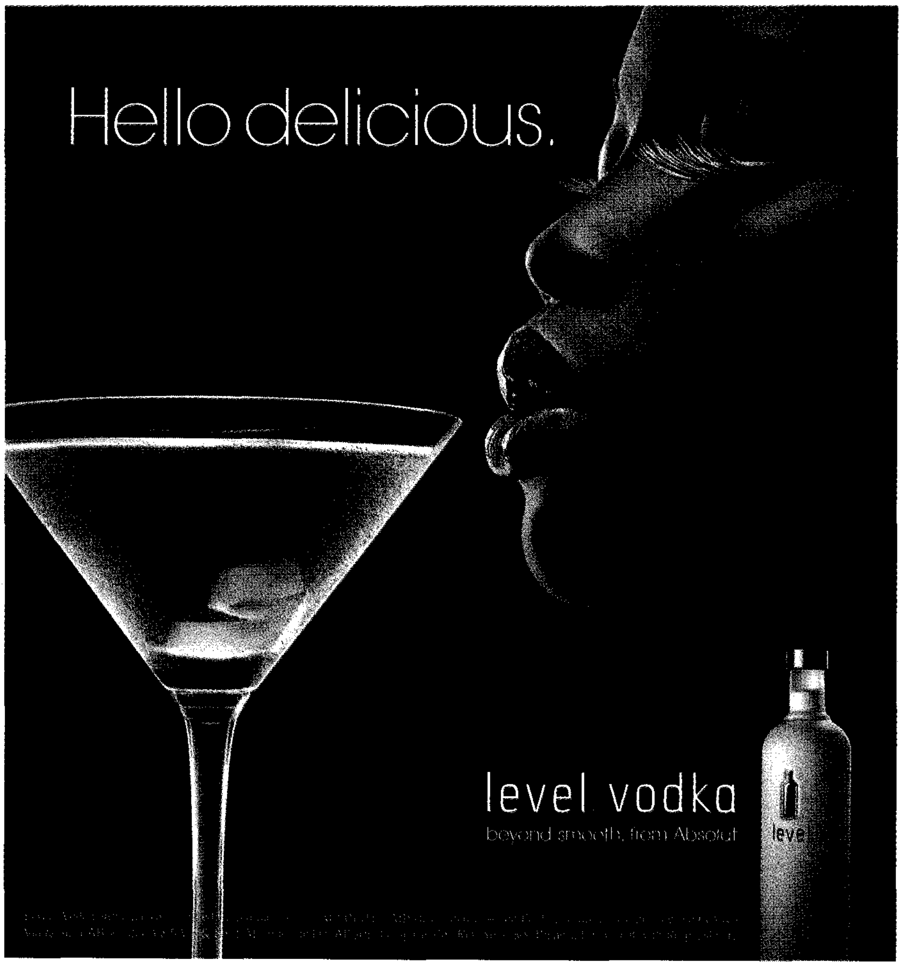
In her new trio "And How Should I Begin?," the gifted young choreographer struggles with T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The poem is both muttered sotto voce and recited outright, and Vandenbroucke draws upon its teacups, sprawled bodies, magic lanterns, and mermaids riding the waves. Yet the dance, measured out in super-brief vignettes, is strongest when it treats the poem's melancholy obliquely, using photocopies of the poem to wall off or connect the dancers. (Baryshnikov Arts Center, 450 W. 37th St. 212-868-4444. April 18-21 at 8.)

AILEY II

The junior ensemble concludes its first two-week season at the organization's home theatre. (Ailey Citigroup Theatre, 405 W. 55th St. 212-868-4444. April 18-20 at 8, April 21 at 3 and 8, and April 22 at 3.)

KIMBERLY BARTOSIK / JENNIFER ALLEN

Bartosik and Allen share a double bill at the Kitchen in an evening that focusses on their dis-



tinct theatrical approaches. Bartosik, who performed for nine years with Merce Cunningham and later with Wally Cardona, presents "Ecsteriority1," the first part of an evening-length work in progress exploring the nexus between decay and eros. Allen uses video design and installations in her new work, "Open," which takes its inspiration from the freedom, joy, and fear inherent in childhood. (512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793, ext. 11. April 19-21 at 8.)

MONICA BILL BARNES / NICHOLASLEICHTERDANCE
Two talented downtown choreographers bring their repertories uptown. Barnes shows her lyrical side along with her famous wit, in solos and duets. Leichter, whose work blends street and classroom styles, is funky and subversive, skewering stereotypes and losing his mind to a Mariah Carey song. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. April 19-21 at 8:30.)

"WORKS & PROCESS"
In "Slow Dancing," David Michalek captures a burst of dancing on film, at a thousand frames per second, then plays it back in extreme slow motion, stretching a few seconds of footage across ten minutes. The result is a rare chance to savor details normally too short-lived to study. Michalek's full project will be displayed during the Lincoln Center Festival this summer, but at the Guggenheim he's joined by Wendy Whelan, Herman Cornejo, and Desmond Richardson, who re-create their filmed sequences live and offer reactions to seeing their decelerated selves. (Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3587. April 22-23 at 7:30.)

"KNEELINGS"
Clare Byrne, a choreographer with an idiosyncratic and visceral sense of spirituality, hits the sidewalks of New York for a series of devotional genuflections. Spread over the next two weeks and involving various guests, the free events trace, in their locations, a spiral across the city. (April 22-May 6. For complete schedule, visit www.clarebyrnedance.org.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
The final performances of **"Andrea Chénier,"** featuring the estimable Ben Heppner, Violeta Urmana, and Juan Pons in the leading roles; Marco Armiliato conducts. (April 18 at 8.) ♦ The Met's **"Turandot"** needs big voices to match the spacious architecture and elaborate bric-a-brac of Zeffirelli's renowned production. Andrea Gruber and Richard Margison will take the roles of the Ice Princess and her suitor Calaf, with the elegant Hei-Kyung Hong in the role of Liù; Armiliato. (April 19 at 8.) ♦ The soprano Erika Sunnegårdh's last-minute substitution for Karita Mattila in the title role of "Fidelio," in April of 2006, was the last public-relations splash of the Joseph Volpe era. In more settled circumstances, Sunnegårdh replaces Gruber in Puccini's demanding title role; Liping Zhang replaces Hong. (April 21 at 8:30.) ♦ If any Puccini opera belongs to the Met, it's **"Il Trittico,"** a brilliant sequence of one-act operas that was commissioned by the company and premièred here (with such legends as Claudia Muzio, Geraldine Farrar, and Giuseppe De Luca in the leading roles) in 1918. The new production, directed by Jack O'Brien, features such singers as Maria Guleghina, Salvatore Licitra, Barbara Frittoli, Stephanie Blythe, and Alessandro Corbelli; James Levine. (April 20 and April 23 at 8.) ♦ Ruth Ann Swenson's recent health problems may have taken a bit of shine off her coloratura passagework, but her performance in the role of Cleopatra in Handel's **"Giulio Cesare"** is full of magnificent musicianship and theatrical verve. David Daniels and Alice Coote, as expected, are excellent as Caesar and Sesto, respectively, and the revival also includes welcome débuts by Patricia Bardon, Lawrence Zazzo, and Michael Maniaci; Harry Bicket. (April 21 at 1:30.) ♦ With Danielle de Niese replacing Swenson, Jill Grove replacing Bardon, Zazzo replacing Daniels, and Gerald Thompson taking Zazzo's former role. (April 24 at 7:30.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

NEW YORK CITY OPERA
The last few days of the City Opera season include several performances of **"Madama Butterfly,"** with Shu-Ying Li, Keri Alkema, Christopher Jackson, and Marco Nisticò in the leading roles; Atsushi Yamada conducts. (April 18 at 7:30, April 20 at 8, and April 22 at 1:30.) ♦ The Renata Scotto production of **"La Traviata,"** featuring Anne-Sophie Duprels, Bruce Sledge, and Michael Corvino in the leading roles; George Manahan, the company's music director, conducts. (April 19 at 7:30 and April 21 at 1:30.) ♦ City Opera's acclaimed production of **"Flavio,"** a diverting tragicomedy in Handel's lighter vein, returns with the countertenor David Walker in the title role, joined by such singers as Marguerite Krull, Kathryn Friest-Allyn, and Gerald Thompson; William Lacey, a British newcomer, leads the orchestra. (April 21 at 8.) (New York State Theatre. 212-721-6500.)

AMATO OPERA: "MADAMA BUTTERFLY"
City Opera's "Madama Butterfly" is the refined, abstract Mark Lamos production; if the lusty Italian hill-town style is more appealing, then see the Amato's offering (directed, as always, by the venerable Anthony Amato). (April 21 at 7:30 and April 22 at 2:30. Through May 13.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
The music of Brahms, as beloved and ubiquitous as ever, would hardly seem ripe for the full festival treatment, but Lorin Maazel, reëstablishing his pure classical credentials at this late stage in his career, has been leading his great orchestra in a series of concerts throughout the spring. This week's first installment features the "Academic Festival Overture," the Violin Concerto (with Julia Fischer), and the First Symphony. (April 18-19 at 7:30.) ♦ Glenn Dicterow, the Philharmonic's concertmaster, and Carter Brey, its principal cellist, will perform the solo parts of the Double Concerto, the centerpiece of a program that also includes the "Tragic Overture" and the sunny Symphony No. 2. (April 20 at 2 and April 21 at 8.) (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656.)

NETHERLANDS BACH SOCIETY
In an era of high-flying early-music superstars, Jos van Veldhoven's longtime ensemble endures as a bastion of unshowy purist performance. He brings his singers and players to the Metropolitan Museum for Bach's Mass in B Minor. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. April 18 at 8.)

UBS VERBIER FESTIVAL CHAMBER ORCHESTRA
Corporate branding, long applied to sports stadiums, comes to classical music with this young orchestra, sponsored by the financial giant, under the command of the Russian violinist Maxim Vengerov. Fortunately, Vengerov is magnificent, and his charges are both expert and devoted; their program (featuring Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante, two of his Violin Concertos, and Shostakovich's Chamber Symphony, Op. 110a) will be delivered in the grand, bighearted Rostropovich style. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. April 19-20 at 8.)

BROOKLYN PHILHARMONIC
Stefan Asbury, a vaunted British new-music hand, leads the adventurous orchestra, joined by the ever-adaptable Kronos Quartet, in the New York première of Julia Wolfe's "My Beautiful Scream," an anguished meditation on 9/11. Also featured are exploratory visions of outer space (Holst's "The Planets," accompanied by NASA film footage) and of a mythical English past (Vaughan Williams's "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis"). (Brooklyn Academy of Music, 30 Lafayette Ave. 718-636-4100. April 21 at 8.)

"MUSIC BEFORE 1800": CHOIR OF CORPUS CHRISTI CHURCH
New York's finest early-music import series stays close to home, presenting its resident ensemble in a program of Roman sacred music by such composers as Palestrina, Frescobaldi, and Carissimi (the oratorio "Jephte," the composer's one claim to immortality). (529 W. 121st St. 212-666-9266. April 22 at 4.)

POP NOTES
PRODUCTION EFFECTS

What does a hip-hop producer do when he decides that he wants to rap? If he's smart, he surrounds himself with better rappers, and maybe a few singers. Timbaland has been trying to rap for years. His new solo album, "Shock Value," is built like the four that came before it: fantastic music and talented guests paired with one very forgettable rapper. In 2006, Timbaland produced Justin Timberlake and Nelly Furtado—two of the year's biggest pop stars—so perhaps it's no surprise that they help him out here. The album's delightful first single, "Give It to Me," wisely enlists both of them.

The song's beat is a discussion between drums and what sounds like the latch of a briefcase being clicked shut. Timbaland insults the successful producer Scott Storch—"I'm a real producer, and you just a piano man"—while Timberlake taunts a peer who isn't selling many records. Furtado's verse mentions Amnesty International, inexplicably, and addresses those who admired her rear end and abdominal muscles in the video for "Promiscuous," explicably. Her biggest contribution is the melodic chorus, which recalls eighties dance artists like Jermaine Stewart: "If you see us in the club, we'll be acting real nice." Aw.

Swizz Beatz, a producer who works largely with rappers, doesn't often rhyme on his own productions. On "It's Me, Bitches," the first single from his forthcoming solo album, it's clear why. Though his voice is gruff, his rhymes sound like they were lifted from a YouTube video of a Serbian teen who has just discovered the Sugarhill Gang. ("Rock and don't stop, I keep it rocking don't stop, I'm banging them beats you know I rock the hip hop.") He's given us a fantastic beat, though, one that deserves real vocals. Within weeks, it got them. The remixed version replaces Swizz's rapping almost entirely. Lil Wayne, who is currently earning the title "best rapper alive" (an honorific he awarded himself), opens the song by quoting "Lady Marmalade" 's French chorus, and then switches to a convincing imitation of a Jamaican dancehall artist. The R. & B. singer R. Kelly uses the phonetic possibilities of the producer's name—"Every time I shoot a shot, it's like 'swizz'!"—and sings a line from "Dreamgirls." The raspy New York rapper Jadakiss ends the song by rapping over the beat from "C.R.E.A.M.," by Wu-Tang Clan, a hip-hop group fronted by one of the few producers who can actually rap, the RZA. Swizz, take note: when the RZA put the Wu-Tang Clan together, back in 1992, he asked eight other rappers to join him. Better safe than sorry.

—*Sasha Frere-Jones*

KREMERATA BALTICA
Maxim Vengerov is not the only charismatic violinist from the former Soviet Union to lead a brilliant young band of players at Carnegie Hall this week. There's also Gidon Kremer, who will direct a typically diverse program of works by Beethoven (the "Grosse Fuge"), Schumann (a violin-and-strings transcription of the Cello Concerto), Korngold, and Piazzolla. (212-247-7800. April 23 at 8.)

RECITALS

"MET @ GOETHE": SASHA COOKE
The rising young mezzo-soprano—a member of the Metropolitan Opera's young-artist program, who sings with an appealing shade of Janet Baker—performs songs by Korngold, Debussy, Tchaikovsky, and Brahms at the Goethe-Institut of New York. (1014 Fifth Ave. 212-439-8700. April 18 at 7:30.)

KARITA MATTILA AND MARTIN KATZ
The radiant Finnish diva, with her admired accompanist, sings Barber's lulling "Hermit Songs," a selection from Wolf's "Spanisches Liederbuch," and a variety of Finnish songs at Carnegie Hall. (212-247-7800. April 18 at 8.)

CHRISTOPHE ROUSSET
A recital of works by Couperin—both *père et fils*—and J. S. Bach and his son C. P. E. Bach, offered by the elegant French harpsichordist. (Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. April 19 at 7:30.)

EMANUEL AX AND EDGAR MEYER
Zankel Hall, the scene of many cross-fertilizing concerts, presents the poetic pianist together with the stellar bass player (deeply influenced by jazz and bluegrass) in a concert of works by Bach, Haydn, Meyer, Bright Sheng, and the mandolin phenom Chris Thile. (212-247-7800. April 20 at 7:30.)

MUSIC FROM THE COLBURN SCHOOL
Los Angeles, known for its front-rank studio musicians and its increasingly potent Philharmonic, has a new, high-class conservatory of music, established in 2003. Some of its best musicians—including the veteran cellist Ronald Leonard and the young, award-winning Janaki String Trio—offer a concert at the 92nd Street Y. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. April 20 at 8.)

MIDORI AND ROBERT MCDONALD
The New York première of Einojuhani Rautavaara's "Lost Landscapes" (a musical memoir of his times in residence at Tanglewood and in Vienna, Switzerland, and New York) is the highlight of a broad program by the violinist and her longtime accompanist, which also features works by Strauss, Hindemith, and Beethoven (the "Spring" Sonata). (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-721-6500. April 24 at 8.)

MILLER THEATRE: MUSIC BY KIMMO HAKOLA
Hakola, who, like Esa-Pekka Salonen, was born in 1958 and was a student of Rautavaara, is now a leading light of the next wave of Finnish composers. His sometimes manic music—which cherry-picks fragments of both modernist and folkloric styles—will be performed by the stalwart Milwaukee ensemble Present Music. (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. April 24 at 8.)

MOVIES OPENING

ALICE NEEL
A documentary about the late artist, directed by her grandson, Andrew Neel. Opening April 20. (Cinema Village.)

FRACTURE
A thriller, directed by Gregory Hoblit, about a prosecutor's effort to trap a structural engineer who is acquitted of trying to kill his wife. Starring Ryan Gosling and Anthony Hopkins. Opening April 20. (In wide release.)

GOODBYE MOMO
In this drama from Uruguay, a child of the streets is taught to read by a newspaper office's watchman. Directed by Leonardo Ricagni. In Spanish. Opening April 20. (Quad Cinema.)

HOT FUZZ
Edgar Wright ("Shaun of the Dead") directed this comedy, about police action in a small English town. Opening April 20. (In wide release.)

IN THE LAND OF WOMEN
Adam Brody, Meg Ryan, and Olympia Dukakis star in this drama, about a TV writer who goes home to care for his ailing grandmother. Directed by Jonathan Kasdan. Opening April 20. (In wide release.)

STEPHANIE DALEY
Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening April 20. (Village East Cinemas.)

SYNDROMES AND A CENTURY
Apichatpong Weerasethakul directed this film, about a woman doctor in rural Thailand and a

Recent photographs by Thomas Struth, including "Museo del Prado 7, Madrid" (2005), are at the Marian Goodman gallery.

male doctor in the city. In Thai. Opening April 18. (IFC Center.)

VACANCY

A horror film, directed by Nimród Antal, starring Kate Beckinsale and Luke Wilson as a couple who are trapped in a hotel room that is used to make snuff films. Opening April 20. (In wide release.)

THE VALET

A billionaire invents a boyfriend for his mistress in order to avoid a costly divorce. Directed by Francis Veber; starring Daniel Auteuil, Kristin Scott Thomas, and Gad Elmaleh. In French. Opening April 20. (Angelika Film Center and Cinemas 1, 2, and 3.)

NOW PLAYING

BLACK BOOK

Paul Verhoeven's film, made in his native Holland, follows the adventures of Rachel Stein (Carice van Houten), a young Jewish woman who draws on all her courage, resourcefulness, and lingerie to survive the Second World War. Having lost her family in an ambush, she joins the Dutch Resistance, where her principal intelligence-gathering task is to seduce the chief of the Gestapo (Sebastian Koch). This she performs so energetically that they end up falling in love. (You know how adorable those Gestapo fellows can be.) Meanwhile, the Resistance is being undermined by a mole, whose treachery is not revealed until the end. Van Houten is never less than spirited, yet the movie comes across as a tacky, unappealing compound of the casual and the vicious; Rachel and other resisters may be wounded and humiliated, yet suffering, in Verhoeven's eyes, seems to be little more than a temporary setback. Is that really how he wants us to observe the Jewish experience? In Dutch.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 4/9/07.) (In wide release.)

BLADES OF GLORY

This boisterous comedy, set in the milieu of competitive figure skating, concerns two rival skaters, Chazz Michael Michaels (Will Ferrell), a macho sex bomb, and Jimmy MacElroy (a memorably coiffed Jon Heder), a shy, sensitive finesse artist. Banned for life from their event after a knock-down, drag-out fight, they return from years of exile to compete as the first all-male pair. Unfortunately, the idea is better than the movie: the adventures on and off the ice, and the endless flow of innuendo (lots of crotch jokes and winking allusions to homosexuality), signify humor without actually being funny. It could have been otherwise. A platoon of screenwriters put lively characters in loopy situations with clever dialogue, but it's all thrown away by the rudderless direction of Will Speck and Josh Gordon, TV-commercial directors who make their feature début a series of half-minute sketches lacking rhythm and mood. Ferrell and Heder, as well as Will Arnett and Amy Poehler as Stranz and Fairchild Van Waldenberg, a villainous brother-and-sister pair, and the charmingly awkward Jenna Fischer as their lovestruck little sister, work so hard to put the material over that it's easy to overlook the sad truth.—*Richard Brody* (In wide release.)

DISTURBIA

Judged as an adolescent, suburban version of Hitchcock's extraordinarily sophisticated 1954 urban thriller "Rear Window," this movie, written by Christopher B. Landon and Carl Ellsworth and directed by D. J. Caruso, can rightly be called a travesty. The dopiness of it, however, may be an indication not so much of cinematic ineptitude as of the changes in a movie culture that was once devoted to adults and is now rather haplessly and redundantly devoted to kids. Shia LaBeouf, Sarah Roemer, and Aaron Yoo, aided by enough electronic equipment to open a Circuit City, spy on a suspected murderer (David Morse) living across the street. When he gets wise to them, the picture turns into a conventional (and at times effectively scary) horror movie, with splattered blood and corpses floating in some sort of basement vat. With Carrie-Anne Moss.—*David Denby* (In wide release.)

FIRST SNOW

In the director Mark Fergus's moody metaphysical thriller, a sleazy salesman (Guy Pearce) with a less than honorable past attempts to derail a palm reader's prediction that he'll die during the first snowfall of winter. The movie's erratic tone—discussions of fate and responsibility mix with herky-jerky suspense scenes filled with ominous details—keeps the story just off balance enough to be intriguing. Pearce, with his lean and hungry good looks, gives his character a nervous, desperate demeanor that lifts the movie from a talky, paranoid exercise to an edgy little noir.—*Bruce Diones* (Sunshine Cinema.)

GRINDHOUSE

A mixture of pop academicism and eternal-adolescent exuberance, this three-hour Quentin Tarantino–Robert Rodriguez tribute to the exploitation movies of the seventies includes two new junk features and such divertissements as trailers for imaginary pictures ("Werewolf Women of the S.S."), ads for nauseating food at local restaurants, and deep scratches on the film, as lovingly inscribed as the speckled antiquing on a blanket chest. In the Rodriguez feature, "Planet Terror," a dawn-of-the-dead fantasia, flesh melts, bodies explode like liquid packages squeezed too hard, testicles roll about on the ground. Some of this is fitfully amusing, but a loving re-creation of something tawdry is not all that different from the original. Even a postmodernist bloodbath is wet, sticky, and red. Tarantino's feature, "Death Proof," presents two lovable groups of women, the second of which takes on a mad stunt driver (Kurt Russell) in one of the most impressive car battles in movie history. Tarantino has his triumph, but he's caught in the contradictions of making an hommage à schlock—he can't decide whether to be a humanist or a nihilist, so he opportunistically becomes both. With Rose McGowan, Rosario Dawson, Tracie Thoms, and the New Zealand stuntwoman Zoe Bell. The directors did their own cinematography.—*D.D.* (4/16/07) (In wide release.)

HELL'S HINGES

This stark, brutal Western from 1916, co-directed by and starring William S. Hart, presents a raw, violent, thoroughly demythologized Wild West. The rudimentary plot concerns an inept preacher sent to bring the Gospel to a rough outpost known as Hell's Hinges, and the town's toughest gunman (Hart), whose better instincts are awakened by his love for the preacher's sister. The first shot of the hardscrabble town, showing a mob swarming through clouds of dust to witness a brawl, sets the tone for this grim view of frontier life. Hart's spangled coat is more expressive than his blank, stoic face; the landscape of forbidding hills and scattered sagebrush is equally void and featureless; and there's no sheriff or federal troops to quell the chaos. The images are as direct and bare as the characters' emotions, and the harsh drama builds to a mad, apocalyptic climax of crime and revenge. Silent.—*R.B.* (Moving Image; April 21.)

THE HOAX

The barely believable tale of Clifford Irving. He was the joker who, in 1971, declared that he had been contacted by Howard Hughes, who needed a writer to help him with his memoirs. This was utterly untrue, but it didn't stop Irving (Richard Gere) and his corpulent, fretful sidekick, Dick Susskind (Alfred Molina), from extracting an advance of half a million dollars from a New York publisher, with the promise of more to come. The first half of Lasse Hallström's film, written by William Wheeler, zips through these frauds and grand delusions with glee; Hallström seems happier in such slippery company than he did with the sluggishness of "Chocolat" or "The Shipping News." The movie treads more heavily as the story proceeds, as the real Hughes intervenes and Irving apparently starts to lose his mind; yet the result, performed with gusto across the board, still makes a rich addition to the cinema of suckerdom. With Hope Davis and Stanley Tucci in fine fettle as the publishers who fall into the trap.—*A.L.* (4/9/07) (In wide release.)

THE HOST

Something is hiding in the River Han, in the middle of Seoul. As a result of industrial pollution, a small tadpole has grown not into a respectable frog but into a bad-tempered tadpole the size of a bus. Soon it starts leaving the water, snatching ordinary Koreans from the banks and carrying them off to its fetid home in the sewers. When a young girl is taken, her father, the hitherto hopeless Gang-du (Song Kang-ho), enlists the aid of his family and sets off to save her. Bong Joon-ho's monster movie is often funny and occasionally disgusting, but rarely does it strike you as ridiculous. By the end (which is only just happy), you feel threatened and drained, as you should after a grownup fairy tale, and there are moments of surprising grace—as when an apparition of the girl sneaks into the midst of a communal meal. On the other hand, don't go looking for mercy from the beast; this thing would treat King Kong as a typical bleeding-heart mammal. In Korean.—*A.L.* (3/12/07) (In wide release.)

LONELY HEARTS

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (In wide release.)

THE LOOKOUT

The young actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who looks a little like Keanu Reeves, only smarter, is Chris Pratt, a Midwestern high-school jock and rich kid who hurt his head in a car accident (it was his fault) and now suffers from short-term-memory loss. Chris, estranged from his family and his former self, works as a night janitor in a bank and falls into the clutches of a vicious high-school acquaintance (Matthew Goode) who has always envied him and now wants to use him to knock over the bank. This small-scale thriller, the directorial début of the screenwriter Scott Frank ("Minority Report"), depends on character and atmosphere and suspense—the violence is minimal. The hero isn't stupid by any means; his problem, as he tries to extricate himself from the bank robbery, is how to turn his handicap into an advantage. Frank displays a convincing sense of evil—and of goodness, too. (Chris's roommate, who looks after him, is a smart, ornery blind man, played by Jeff Daniels.)—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

REIGN OVER ME

Not, as you might think, a quickie sequel to "The Queen" but the story of Charlie Fineman (Adam Sandler), a dentist who lost his wife and three daughters in the horror of 9/11. He is reduced to a murmuring wreck, roaming New York on a scooter, until he has a chance encounter with an old dental-school roommate of his named Alan Johnson (Don Cheadle). Alan has troubles of his own, though they seem paltry by comparison: a frozen marriage, plus a patient (Saffron Burrows) who keeps offering her sexual services. *He* should worry. Slowly, and not without mishap, the two men rediscover their friendship. The result could well have turned cheap and maudlin, but the writer and director, Mike Binder, grasps the stubbornness of grief; Charlie may be hauled back from the verge of suicide, but he will never be cured. Even viewers allergic to Sandler may concede that his air of mumbling drift is right for the role, and Cheadle never misses a beat. With Liv Tyler, Donald Sutherland, and a chunky soundtrack: the title echoes a song from "Quadrophenia."—*A.L.* (3/26/07) (In wide release.)

SHOOTER

A virtual textbook of action clichés: an incomparable marksman, stealthy, silent, inexorable, hiding among snowcapped peaks; the muzzle of a high-powered rifle aimed directly at the camera; helicopters swirling over mountains and city streets, chasing the hero from the sky; gunmetal colors everywhere and the *chuggah-chuggah-chuggah* of pounding drums and electronic music, a sound both primal and advanced at the same time. Betrayed twice by his country, Mark Wahlberg's Bob Lee Swagger, an ex-marine, takes vengeance on the swine who tried to do him in—a rogue unit in the government, operating under the control of a powerful, oil-mad senator from Montana (a Dick Cheney-like figure, played by Ned Beatty). The government may be rotten, but American honor is saved by the lone killer. The director, Antoine Fuqua, is trying to appeal both to liberals and to the paleo-conservatives who hate big government and big corporations alike. The loony clash of political currents suggests the degree of confusion roiling Hollywood at the moment.—*D.D.* (4/2/07) (In wide release.)

STEPHANIE DALEY

Half a terrific film. This drama, written and directed by Hilary Brougher and starring Amber Tamblyn and Tilda Swinton (who is also the executive producer), reflects the virtues and flaws of its independent production. The engrossing half concerns the title character (Tamblyn), a sixteen-year-old girl in a Hudson Valley town who gives birth while on a ski trip. The newborn dies, and Stephanie, who successfully concealed her pregnancy from family and friends, is charged with homicide. Most of her richly textured and poignant story—which highlights the pervasive influence of religion in small-town life—is told in flashbacks from her interrogations by the forensic psychologist assigned to the case, Lydie Crane, played by Swinton. Lydie is pregnant, has recently suffered a stillbirth, and endures the bourgeois marital stresses and silences endemic to books and movies. (Timothy Hutton plays her intellectually suave, emotionally needy architect husband.) Her story is generic and inconsequential; Stephanie, as brought to life in Tamblyn's nuanced and daring performance, deserves to have the film to herself.—*R.B.* (Village East Cinemas.)

300

Perhaps the nuttiest movie ever to become a monster hit, this porno-military curiosity features muscle-queen Spartans who fight in leather codpieces and red capes and die clutching each other's hands, and a Persian king, Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro), who is an epicene, nearly naked seven-footer with a shaved head, piercings, and what looks like a gold-lamé thong. Xerxes lounges on cushions in his court, surrounded by intertwined naked lesbians who writhe like snakes in a basket. It's too solemn and violent to be camp. The director, Zack Snyder, poses the Spartan heroes against the horizon or along the crests of mountains under roiling skies. The softening hues of blue and yellow have been filtered or drained out of the palette; the dominant color is the molten brown-gold of bronze shields. It has something to do with the battle of Thermopylae. The actors, including Gerard Butler and Lena Headey, are nonentities. From a graphic novel by Frank Miller.—*D.D.* (4/2/07) (In wide release.)

THE TV SET

"Truthfully, 'original' scares me a little," says Lenny (Sigourney Weaver), the TV network head in Jake Kasdan's sharp satirical comedy about the difficulties of getting a series off the ground. Lenny is the chief nemesis of Kasdan's hard-pressed hero, the writer-producer Mike Klein (David Duchovny), whose somewhat daring idea for a show gets squeezed by Lenny into a piece of conventional whimsy. Kasdan is shrewd and funny about such things as the intricate protocol on the set and the diverse ways that powerful people feign sincerity. The satire is unrelenting but not too broad; it stays close to common observation. Kasdan's special target: the astonishing Hollywood habit of presenting even the most negative opinions of a writer's or actor's work in initial upbeat panegyrics ("We loved it! Loved it!"), followed by the inevitable kicker "But we have some concerns," which, it turns out, completely undermines whatever it was that the writer or actor was trying to do.—*D.D.* (4/16/07) (In wide release.)

THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY

The 1920-22 Irish revolt against the English, reimagined by the social realist Ken Loach as an awkwardly violent and sombre old poem made without the usual Irish flourishes of wildness or lyricism. The British military cars, tin lizzies carrying men in the open, are almost comically antique and vulnerable; the I.R.A. rebels, who wear

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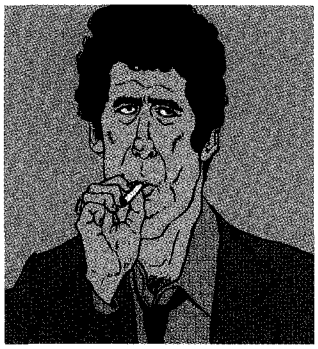
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
SUNSHINE SHAMUS

It was quite a journey that Raymond Chandler made from "The Big Sleep" (1939) to the looser, more embittered strains of "The Long Goodbye" (1954), but that was a short hop compared with the distance between



KAREN DAVIDSON

Howard Hawks's movie of the first book, in 1946, and Robert Altman's 1973 reimagining of the second, which shows at Film Forum for a week, starting April 20. Gone is the rattle of one-liners, replaced by a fuzz of slurred and competing voices. Bogart was no dandy, but Altman's choice for Philip Marlowe, Elliott Gould, is one part investigator to two parts bum. The plot, adapted by Leigh Brackett, is close to Chandler's at the beginning, with Marlowe wrongly arrested as an accessory to murder, but from there it wanders off, leaving a deeper mystery: What is his real interest in the case? Is it merely the presence of a blonde (Nina Van Pallandt), or the boozy hospitality of her husband (Sterling Hayden)? The film, boldly updated to the seventies, is itself now a period piece; who smokes as intensively as Marlowe in the California of today?

—*Anthony Lane*

awkward long coats and caps as they scramble across a hill, look less like a guerrilla force than like fellows who had planned to go shopping with their families but somehow got sidetracked into a bizarre adventure. Loach is trying for his own kind of scrappy truthfulness, in which pent-up physical violence bursts forth clumsily, avoiding the typically stylized glamour of classic movie mayhem. Here, violence has the look of surprise. With Cillian Murphy as a refined young rebel who wants complete separation from Great Britain and a socialist revolution in Ireland, and Padraic Delaney as his rough-hewn brother, who is willing to accept the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. Shot in County Cork by the cinematographer Barry Ackroyd.—*D.D.* (3/19/07) (In wide release.)

WOMAN ON THE BEACH
Hong Sang-soo's expansive, tender melodrama, from 2006, is also one of the recent cinema's deepest portraits of an artist. Jung-rae, a filmmaker who is having trouble writing a script, cajoles his assistant, Chang-wook, into driving him from Seoul to a desolate seaside resort. Chang-wook has a date with his girlfriend, Mun-suk, but the director persuades him to bring her along for the ride. The ensuing complication is inevitable; but despite Jung-rae's growing bond with Mun-suk, which liberates his artistic imagination, she is not the only woman on the beach. Hong delineates the exquisitely calibrated intimacy and cruelty of these relationships with a self-deprecating sincerity. His airy, unhurried images let a maximum of reality rush in. The characters' headlong leap toward mingled joy and pain suggests a vulnerability and a hunger for experience that are themselves a lesson in art: the intense, conflicting emotions are the creator's raw material, and the depiction of the avidly searching director is a persuasive self-portrait of Hong himself. In Korean.—*R.B.* (BAM; April 21.)

YEAR OF THE DOG
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (In wide release.)

Also Playing

ARE WE DONE YET?: In wide release. **KILLER OF SHEEP:** IFC Center. **MEET THE ROBINSONS:** In wide release. **PERFECT STRANGER:** In wide release. **THE REAPING:** In wide release. **RED ROAD:** Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Sunshine Cinema.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—Special screenings. "West of the Tracks" (2003, Wang Bing; in Mandarin). April 18 at 7, April 21 at 2, and April 22 at 5: Part 1. ♦ April 19, April 21, and April 23 at 7: Part 2. ♦ April 20 and April 24 at 7 and April 22 at 2: Part 3. ♦ "Goethe-Institut New York Presents." April 19 at 7:30: "Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?" (1970, Rainer Werner Fassbinder; in German).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—"Best of 2006." April 18 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:30: "Time to Leave" (2005, François Ozon; in French). The 6:50 show is followed by a discussion with the critic Elliott Stein. ♦ April 19 at 7: "Zoo" (2007, Robinson Devor). ♦ April 20 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Tale of Cinema" (2005, Hong Sang-soo; in Korean). ♦ April 21 at 3, 6, and 9: "Woman on the Beach" (†). ♦ April 22 at 3 and 7: "Colossal Youth" (2006, Pedro Costa; in Portuguese).

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—"B Musicals." April 18 at 1, 4:30, and 8: "Athena" (1954, Richard Thorpe). ♦ April 18 at 2:55, 6:25, and 9:55: "Sweet and Low-Down" (1944, Archie Mayo). ♦ In revival. April 20-22 and April 24-26 at 1:10, 3:20, 5:30, 7:40, and 9:50 and April 23 at 1:10, 3:20, and 5:30: "The Long Goodbye" (1973, Robert Altman).

FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE
Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—The films of Jacques Tati. April 20 at 7: "Mon Oncle" (1958; in French), introduced by the writer Marie-France Siegler. ♦ April 24 at 12:30 and 7:30: "Parade" (1974; in French). The 12:30 screening will be introduced by Siegler. ♦ April 24 at 4 and 9: "Mr. Hulot's Holiday" (1953; in French).

IFC CENTER
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—"Fares to Remember: Taxi 07." April 20-22 at noon: "Taxi!" (1932, Roy del Ruth). ♦ "Waverly Midnights." April 20-21: "The Holy Mountain" (1973, Alejandro Jodorowsky). ♦ April 20-21: "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" sing-along.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—The films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Except where noted, all films are in German. April 18 at 6 and April 22 at 2: "Kamikaze 1989" (1981, Wolf Gremm). ♦ April 18 at 8:15: "The Merchant of Four Seasons" (1971). ♦ April 19 at 6 and April 21 at 7:30: "Lola" (1981). ♦ April 19 at 8:15: "Veronika Voss" (1982). ♦ April 20 at 6: "Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven" (1975). ♦ April 20 at 8:30: "Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?" (1970). ♦ April 21 at 2: "Fear of Fear" (1975). ♦ April 21 at 7:30: "Whity" (1970). ♦ Special screenings. April 18-19 and April 23 at 7:30, April 20 at 8, April 21 at 4, and April 22 at 2: "The Pervert's Guide to Cinema" (2006, Sophie Fiennes). The April 18 screening will be introduced by the director and Slavoj Žižek. ♦ Films from "The Pervert's Guide to Cinema." April 19 at 5:30: "Duck Soup" (1933, Leo McCarey). ♦ Through April 30: "India Now." April 22 at 7: "Parzania" (2005, Rahul Dholakia; in Hindi and English), introduced by the director. ♦ April 23 at 8:30: "Zero Zone" (2006, Arindam Mitra; in Hindi), introduced by the director.

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—The films of William S. Hart. All films are silent. April 21 at 2: "Hell's Hinges" (†). ♦ April 21 at 4: "The Captive God" (1916, Charles Swickard). ♦ April 21 at 6:30: "The Bargain" (1914, Reginald Barker). ♦ April 22 at 2: "The Return of Draw Egan" (1916). ♦ April 22 at 4: "The Narrow Trail" (1917, Lambert Hillyer).

PIONEER THEATRE
155 E. 3rd St. (212-591-0434)—"Thai Takes 3." All films are in Thai. April 21 at 3: Short films, including "The Anthem" (2005, Apichatpong Weerasethakul). ♦ April 21 at 5:30: "Invisible Waves" (2006, Pen-Ek Ratanaruang). ♦ April 21 at 8: "The Dorm" (2006, Songyot Sugmakanan). ♦ April 22 at 6:30: "Citizen Dog" (2006, Wisit Sasanatieng).

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—"Cabaret Cinema." April 20 at 9:30: "The Five Obstructions" (2003, Lars von Trier; in Danish) and "The Perfect Human" (1967, Jørgen Leth; in Danish).

SUNSHINE CINEMA
143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—"Sunshine@Midnight." April 20-21: "The Disco Dolls in Hot Skin" (1977, Stephen Gibson).

THALIA THEATRE
Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—"Thalia Film Classics." April 22 at 1:30 and 8 and April 24 at 1: "The Man Who Knew Too Much" (1956, Alfred Hitchcock).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—Through May 3: The films of Carlos Saura. All films are in Spanish. April 18 at 1, 5, and 9: "The Hunt" (1966). ♦ April 18 at 5 and 9 and April 19 at 5: "Peppermint Frappe" (1967). ♦ April 19 at 1 and 7 and April 21 at 1:30: "Garden of Delights" (1970). ♦ April 22 at 2 and 6:10: "Ana and the Wolves" (1972). ♦ April 22 at 4 and 8:10: "Cousin Angelica" (1974). ♦ April 23 at 2 and 6:40: "Cria" (1976). ♦ April 23 at 4:15 and 8:50: "Elisa, My Love" (1976). ♦ April 24 at 3:15: "Mama Turns 100" (1979).

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READINGS AND TALKS

MERCANTILE LIBRARY
The library's Center for Fiction presents a reading from the current edition of the literary annual *Noon*, with Deb Olin Unferth, Rebecca Curtis, and Sam Lipsyte. (17 E. 47th St. 212-755-6710. April 18 at 6.)

SCANDINAVIA HOUSE
Kjell Eriksson, Inger Frimansson, Håkan Nesser, and Helene Tursten are four of Sweden's top mystery writers. They all have books coming out in the United States this spring, and, on April 19, after a reading that starts at 6:30, they talk about them with Maggie Topkis, a co-founder of the West Village bookstore Partners & Crime. (Park Ave. at 38th St. 212-879-9779.)

POETRY SOCIETY OF AMERICA
John Hollander, this year's winner of the society's Frost Medal, delivers the keynote address at its annual awards ceremony. Kate Colby, Kimiko Hahn, and Matthew Zapruder, who are also receiving awards, will read from their work. (The New School, 66 W. 12th St. For more information, call 212-254-9628. April 19 at 7.)

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
The writer Pico Iyer and the director Martin Scorsese discuss their callings. (150 W. 17th St. 212-620-5500, ext. 344. April 23 at 7.)

JONATHAN WILSON
Wilson reads from "Marc Chagall," his new biography of the artist. (Barnes & Noble, Sixth Ave. at 22nd St. No tickets necessary. April 24 at 7.)

SMALL PRESS CENTER
Will Leitch, Steve Friedman, Sam Walker, Alison Overholt, and other sports journalists talk about the daily grind. (20 W. 44th St. For more information, call 212-929-2588. April 24 at 7.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

IMMIGRANT HISTORY WEEK
A hundred years ago this April 17, a record number of immigrants, 11,747, came through Ellis Island. Today, forty per cent of Americans are related to someone who set foot on the island during its time as a gateway to this country, from 1892 to 1924. This celebration of the huddled masses includes events on Ellis Island and performances around the city. (For a complete listing, visit www.nyc.gov/immigrants. April 16-22.)

"THE ROSENBACH COMPANY"
This bit of musical theatre, created by the artist Ben Katchor and the musician Mark Mulcahy, uses songs and projected drawings to tell the story of two brothers, Dr. A. S. W. and Philip Rosenbach, who were leading collectors of books and decorative art objects in the first half of the twentieth century. Their home in Philadelphia, which is now a museum, has a bookcase that once belonged to Herman Melville, manuscripts of Joyce's "Ulysses" and Conrad's "Lord Jim," and thousands of drawings by Maurice Sendak. On April 20 at 7, Katchor and Mulcahy present the work in an appropriate setting, the New York Public Library. (Celeste Bartos Forum, Fifth Ave. at 42nd St. 212-868-4444.)

"ED SCHMIDT'S DUMBOLIO"
The latest installation of this monthly variety show in the cavernous PowerHouse Arena performance space features the gravelly voiced singer and guitarist Howard Fishman, the author Ben Greenman (an editor at this magazine), the choreographer Janessa Olsen, and BMX stunt riders from the Base Brooklyn Team, among other acts. The host is Ed Schmidt, a monologuist, actor, and playwright, who performed his one-man drama, "The Last Supper," in his own Brooklyn kitchen and dining room in 2002-03. (37 Main St., Brooklyn. 718-666-3049, ext. 5. April 21 at 8.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES
The two-part Russian sale at **Christie's**, on April 18, is headlined by a rarity, the painting "Solomon's Wall," by the nineteenth-century realist Vasily Vereschagin. Amid the selection of decorative pieces is a delicious little red carnelian gnome by Fabergé, with cabochon sapphires for eyes and a conical hat rimmed in diamonds. This week's busy schedule includes a day of Old Master sales on April 19, with works by Canaletto, El Greco, van Ruysdael, and Turner, and a series of photography auctions on April 23-24. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) ♦ **Sotheby's** sale of nineteenth-century European art (April 18) is especially rich in Victorian paintings, including rich-hued Pre-Raphaelite scenes of beautiful girls in classical and medieval settings by John William Waterhouse and Edmund Leighton. No less refined are the lots in the house's sale of furniture and decorations from an unnamed private collection (April 19), the first installment of which was held, very successfully, in October of last year. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ **Phillips's** evening sale of photographs on April 24 comprises only twenty-seven lots by some of the most important photographers of the last century and a half, from an intimate portrait of a hermaphrodite by Nadar (1860) to a desolate landscape with a Toys R Us store by Andreas Gursky (1999). (450 W. 15th St. 212-940-1200.)

NICOLAS CINQUEGRANI

ON THE HORIZON

MOVIES
THE BOND MARKET
April 27-May 17

Film Forum responds to the collective hunger for espionage, romance, and gizmos with three weeks of James Bond films and other sixties spy movies, including "The Silencers," with Dean Martin, and "Our Man Flint," with James Coburn. (212-727-8110.)

THE THEATRE
BARD ON THE RUN
May 2

The British theatre company Cheek by Jowl brings Shakespeare's rarely performed problem play "Cymbeline" to BAM's Harvey Theatre. On May 3, Tony Kushner will interview the director, Declan Donnellan, before the performance. (718-636-4100.)

ART
MADE BY HAND
May 3-June 30

The forty-year retrospective of Richard Tuttle's sculptures, works on paper, and paintings, which touched down at the Whitney last winter, is now hitting the last stop of its cross-country tour, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Next month, at Sperone Westwater, Tuttle, not one to rest on his laurels, will show what he's been making most recently. (212-999-7337.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
RETURN OF THE KING
May 9-10

No other early-music artist can cast a spell like the Catalan gamba player Jordi Savall, who brings his ensemble Hésperion XXI, which he founded in 1974, to the Metropolitan Museum for two evenings of works by a wide range of European composers. (212-570-3949.)

NIGHT LIFE
ABOVE IT ALL
May 9-19

The eternally mercurial rock star David Bowie curates the inaugural High Line Festival, a gathering of musicians and performers that's been organized to raise money to convert the defunct West Side railway into a park. Acts, including the bands Arcade Fire and Air and the comedian Ricky Gervais, will play at various West Side venues. (www.highlinefestival.com.)

The James Bond classic "Goldfinger," with other spy movies, at Film Forum.

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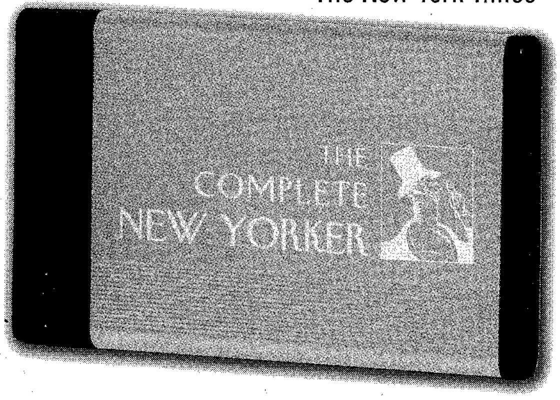

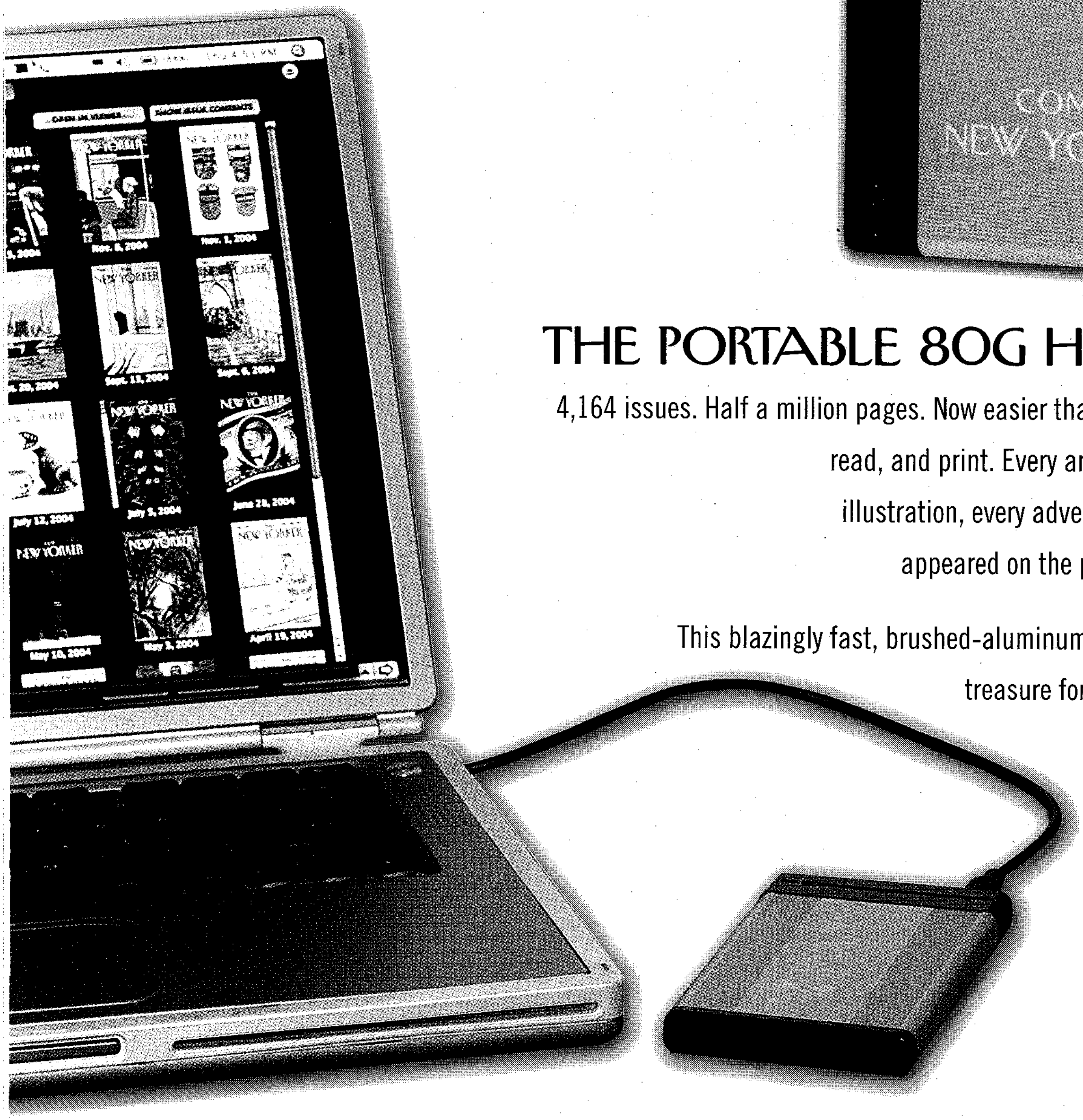

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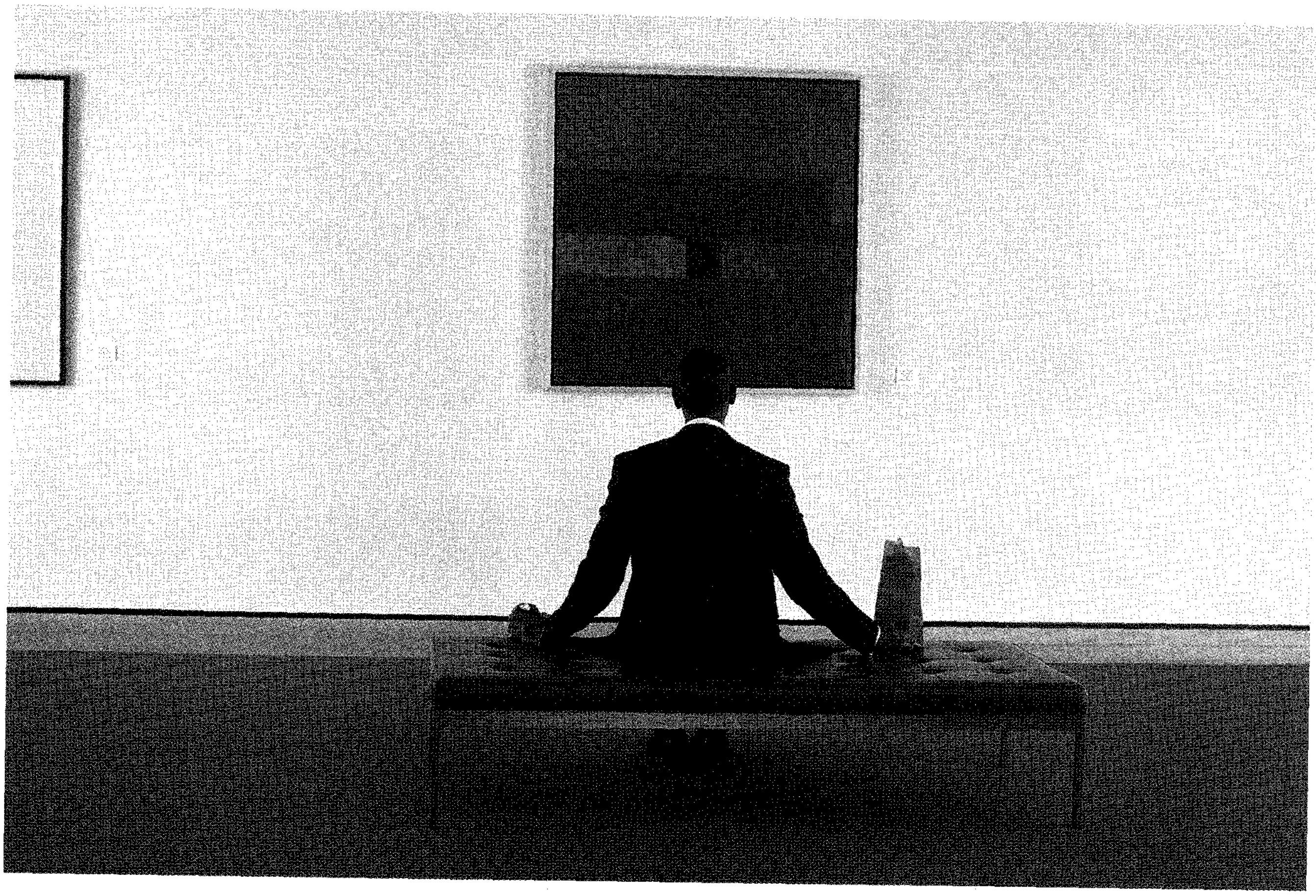

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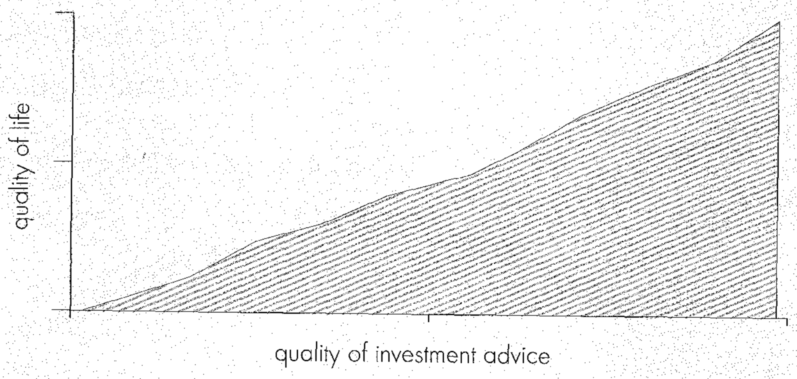

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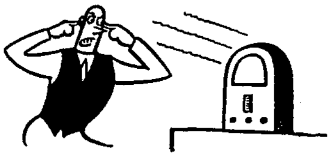
THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT

IMUS VERSUS IMUS

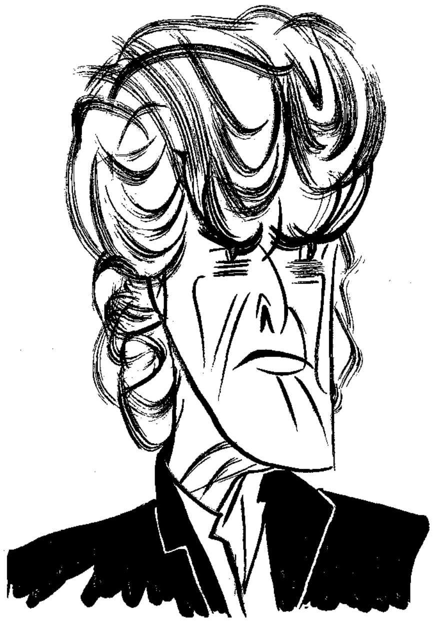


Last month, on the eve of the N.C.A.A. basketball tournament, Bloomsbury published a novelty called "The Enlightened Bracketologist: The Final Four of Everything." In the estimation of the book's editors—Richard Sandomir, a sports-media reporter at the *Times*, and Mark Reiter, a literary agent—bracketology is a peerless tool for adjudication. Basically, you set up a bracket, or knockout draw, as in a tennis or basketball tournament. Graphically, it looks like a tree lying on its side. Through a series of binary pairings (or, to sports fans, head-to-head matchups), you narrow down thirty-two contestants to sixteen, then eight, then four, then two, until a winner emerges. This can work across a range of subjects, as long as there are value judgments to be made. Instead of Kentucky versus Ohio State, you get Miller versus Pabst. Sandomir and Reiter collected a hundred and one imaginary draws, to determine the best entrants in such categories as Elmore Leonard Novels, Golf Swing Thoughts, Bald Guys, and Latin Grammar. (The winners were, respectively, "Killshot," "Focus on your target and ball flight," Gandhi, and the ablative absolute.)

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

One bracket that didn't make it into the book was Good Imus, Evil Imus. Sandomir had drawn that one up in the hope of tempting Don Imus, the talk-radio host and effective promoter of books, to plug "The Enlightened Bracketologist" on his program. In the end, Reiter and Sandomir, loath to pander, decided to leave it out. But last week, in the midst of a controversy over the most extreme—or certainly most consequential—manifestation to date of Evil Imus, a copy of this bracketological outtake found its way here, and provided a useful prism through which to regard the spectacle of Imus's immolation.

Over the years, Imus and, especially, his sidekicks regularly trafficked in minstrelsy, anti-gay patter, and ethnic stereotyping, of degrees ranging from the mild to the execrable. He or his minions have compared Patrick Ewing to an ape, said that pictures of Venus and Serena Williams belong in *National Geographic* rather than in *Playboy*, and are reported to have said of Gwen Ifill, then a *Times* reporter, "Isn't the *Times* wonderful? It lets the cleaning lady cover the White House." More broadly, they have regularly deployed an array of slurs (Jewboy, towelhead) and a cast of crude voice caricatures (Attorney General Alberto Gonzales as José Jiménez, Cardinal Egan as an Irish bigot) that, at best, skirted the line. But finally, two weeks ago, Imus crossed it, or at least got called out for doing so. In a discussion of the Rutgers University women's basketball team, after its appearance in the N.C.A.A. finals, Imus remarked that the players, most of them black, were "rough girls." "Some hard-core ho's," his sidekick and producer (and designated line-crosser) Bernard McGuirk replied. Imus added, inexcusably, "That's some nappy-headed ho's there."



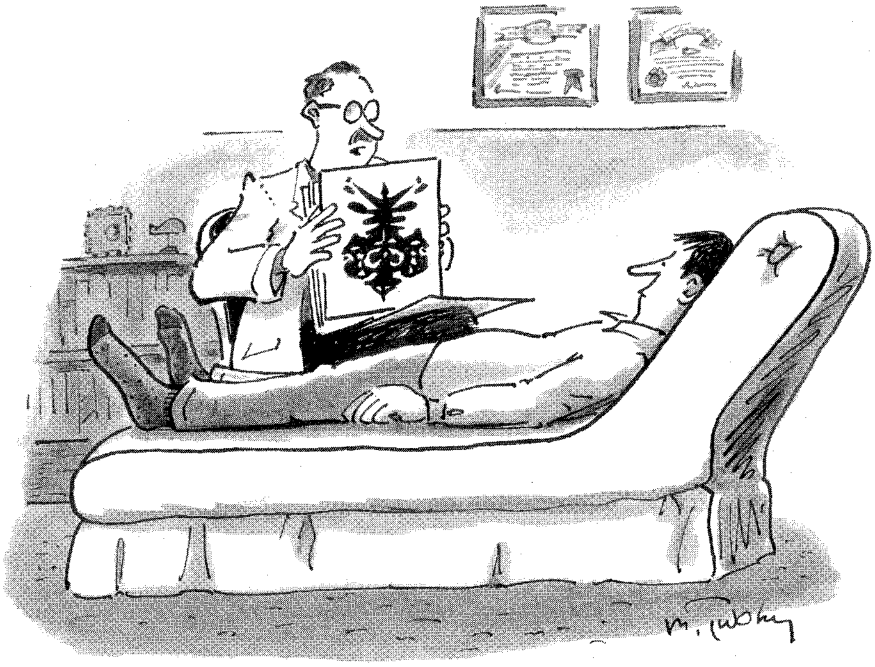
Media Matters for America, a watchdog group, put the offending clip and transcript on its Web site, and in the next couple of days a fury took hold. Imus, initially dismissive, hit the apology circuit, but his grovelling, which managed to seem both grudging and sincere, failed to keep his advertisers and regular guests from abandoning him. (Snoop Dogg, carefully parsing the application of "ho," distanced himself and his rapper peers from the I-man. "We are not talking about no collegiate basketball girls," he told MTV News. "We're talking about ho's that's in the hood that ain't doing shit, that's trying to get a nigga for his money. These are two separate things.") The outrage, and the punishments designed to offset it, metastasized, and by Thursday Imus had lost his show. "You people," as Imus regrettably referred to his tormentors, during a punitive appearance on Al Sharpton's radio show, had won. Governor Jon Corzine, of New Jersey, volunteered to preside over a session between Imus and the Rutgers team at the Governor's Mansion, but on the way he was severely injured in a car crash. The summit went on.

"Imus in the Morning" thrived on a high-low diet. Between the wisecrack-speckled news reports and the coarse comedy bits, the show featured interviews with prominent politicians and journalists (including some from this magazine), who were expected to pay their respects not only to the I-man but also to his brother Fred, the program's self-styled redneck-at-large. In return, guests got publicity for their campaigns or their books, and an opportunity to reveal, to a presumably more sympathetic audience, their irreverent sides—they could be more wry than they generally appeared. Imus either indulged or tolerated them, depending on his mood, but their participation brought him influence and respect. This derived from the airtime, and the threat of haranguing, rather than from any political or ideological inclination. The I-man is not an idea man; although he let his guests veer into politics and policy—an occasional hazard of conversing with politicians—what he really seemed interested in was whether they were talking straight or were being "weasels" or talking "jive." He's a curmudgeon, most of all. And, once the guests were gone, Imus and his cohorts could get back to goofing off, and the politicians could pretend to be oblivious. It was a perilous balancing act, but the two Imuses, like John Edwards's two Americas, managed to coexist.

In the Good Imus, Evil Imus bracketological experiment, the good Imus, represented in the draw by a New Mexico ranch he runs for children with cancer, prevails. On the way to the final, the ranch vanquished Imus's stint in rehab (for cocaine abuse), his marriage (to Deirdre, who converted him to vegetarianism), his calling Bill Clinton "a pot-smoking weasel," and then, in the Final Four, his previously undefeated Clinton modifier—"fat pantload." In the championship, the ranch beat out the best (in this draw) of the bad: Imus's notorious appearance, in 1996, at the Radio and Television Correspondents Association banquet, where he lampooned the infidelities of Bill Clinton, while the President sat beside him on the dais, fuming. Imus's Rutgers smear, if it had suited up, would have creamed them all.

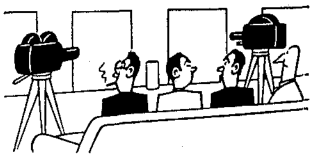
What will come of all this? Perhaps one could set up a new bracketological draw, with all the post-Imus implications and discussion topics bidding, like so many Gonzagas and Florida States, for primacy in the league of cultural consequence. Free-speech martyrdom, hate-speech curtailment, black pride, black blame, white guilt, the end of the shock jock, the rise of satellite radio, the imperialism of advertisers, the intolerance of intolerance, the defilement of the public airwaves: you had better begin filling out your brackets, because the tournament is well under way.

—*Nick Paumgarten*



"There are no wrong answers—only perceived threats to national security."

POT VS. KETTLE DEPT.
LIAR, LIAR



The new movie "The Hoax" concerns the activities of the literary grifter Clifford Irving, who perpetrated the most intrepid publishing fraud of the modern era when, in the early nineteen-seventies, he sold McGraw-Hill the "autobiography" of Howard Hughes, which he wrote without the assistance or the knowledge of Hughes. In the film, which was directed by Lasse Hallström, Richard Gere perpetrates a New York Jewish accent while portraying Irving as a comprehensively dislikable man whose motives were base, venal, and, worst of all—for Irving, at least—quotidian.

"It wasn't about the money," Irving said last week by telephone from Aspen, where he lives with his sixth wife and passes his days—he is seventy-six now—writing and "talking to my trees."

He said, "I wasn't broke. I did what I did for the adventure." The filmmakers, he explained, "couldn't handle the idea of a forty-year-old guy who loves adventure and who doesn't think too clearly about what he's doing."

Irving's decision to criticize the movie for falsifying the history of his lying suggests a capacity for chutzpah rarely found even among the growing cohort of Irving manqués: neither James Frey nor Stephen Glass, for instance, appears to have complained so vociferously about his portrayal in the media.

"Why don't I have the right to talk about accuracy?" Irving asked. "Essentially, the filmmakers are telling the public, 'We have the right to lie to you because he lied to you.' "

Irving originally agreed to coöperate with the project but has lately turned on it. "The guy in the movie is such a sleazebag," he said. "I'd shoot myself if I were that guy." He said that he admires Richard Gere but would have preferred to be played by Howard Stern.

He is upset by what he sees as the great number of errors in "The Hoax." His writing partner, Dick Suskind, is portrayed as a coward and a sap, and he was neither, Irving said. He himself is portrayed as a failing writer who is fired by his publisher after turning in a Philip Roth knockoff called "Rudnick's Problem," when in fact he was a mildly successful author in McGraw-Hill's good graces. Both his wife and his mistress, he went on, are portrayed in inaccurate and unbecoming ways: "Edith, my then wife, a woman of great zest, is portrayed as a dull hausfrau, and Nina van Pallandt, my Danish mistress, as barely one level above a New York hotel hooker." In fact, van Pallandt was minor royalty, by marriage; according to Irving, Edith referred to her rival as "Baroness von Slut."

The film advertises itself as being "based on the true events," which is to say that it adheres only sporadically to Irving's own telling of his story, in a book called "The Hoax." He wrote it in 1972, before entering prison, where he spent nearly two years for fraud associated with the Hughes caper. The book, unlike the movie version, is entirely true, he said. "I'm not a liar. If I lied thirty-five years ago, that doesn't make me a liar today. I'm stunned when people don't believe me. That was an aberration."

"Aberration" does not do justice to Irving's manipulations. He forged letters from Hughes (fairly expertly), stole from the Library of Congress, flew around the world at McGraw-Hill's expense to conduct imaginary interviews, and had his wife establish a Swiss bank account under a false name ("Helga R. Hughes") in order to cash his publisher's checks.

On the other hand, he said, "I guess I can't get too exercised about their changing the story, because that's the essence of the whole story—it's about society's grip on reality.

"Everybody leads a fictional life," he said. "You make a commitment to an act that is self-destructive and you stick with it. It's not only the Bush Administration. It was Vietnam, it's a lot of things. You get on a train and you can't get off because it's going so fast. If you jump off, you hurt yourself and look stupid."

Irving was hesitant to comment on the Frey affair or the Jayson Blair scandal. "I don't know what expertise I bring to these things," he said. But he has thought about how other authors have succeeded where he failed. "That's one of Donald Rumsfeld's unknown unknowns," he said. (He had high praise for Rumsfeld's categories of knowledge: known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns.) "He was getting at something profound, just as Clinton's line about the meaning of 'is' was getting at something profound about truth."

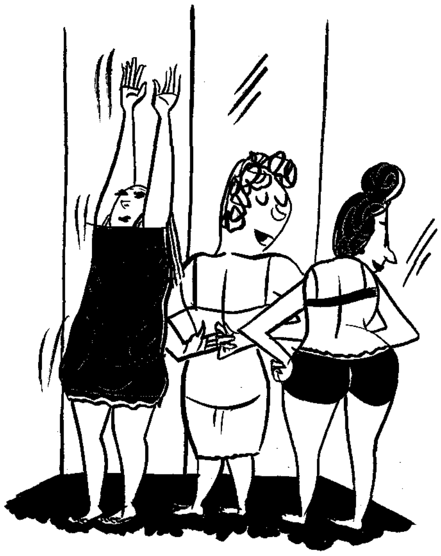
Irving said that it would be entirely possible for an author today to pull off a fraud like his. "Let me show you why it could happen now," he said. "Every one of the reviewers who have watched this movie write about it as if it were true. You can still say anything you want. There's a unanimity of gullibility out there."

—*Jeffrey Goldberg*

DEPT. OF RETAIL
DO I LOOK FAT?

What is it about the Ansonia Hotel, at Broadway and Seventy-third Street, that makes people want to take off their clothes? In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, naked men, sometimes ten thousand of them a week, used to hang out downstairs in the sauna, Turkish baths, and massage parlor of the Continental Baths, where Bette Midler got her start (clothed), singing torch songs poolside, accompanied by Barry Manilow, to an audience of men wearing white towels (black towels on formal nights)—the very same outfit worn by the undercover cops who frequently raided the place. In 1977, women started getting naked, too, when the baths reopened as Plato's Retreat, the heterosexual swingers' club. (Of course, they might have been there for the all-you-can-eat buffet of bagels, lox, and Scotch.)

Look for more skin at this location now that it has been transformed into the newest branch of Loehmann's. Many New York women have traumatic memories of zaftig matrons in giant bras and girdles preening in front of mirrors in the famous communal dressing room, and asking strangers to unzip them, while bored husbands sat in soiled armchairs by the curtained doorway, hoping to catch a glimpse of thigh. As one veteran shopper said recently, "As a child, everything scary I knew about women and female anatomy I learned in that dressing room."



Loehmann's dressing room

The new branch has more than twenty private dressing rooms, but it has kept a communal room, too. Fred Forcellati, the store's advertising and creative director, says, "The older customer prefers the shared experience." One afternoon during the week before the opening, Forcellati was standing in the communal dressing area, a space thought to have housed the "private-encounter rooms" of the Continental Baths. He was fully dressed (though partly bald), mostly in garments that he found in Loehmann's men's department—a plaid Ralph Lauren shirt, Diesel jeans, a mustard-colored corduroy blazer from DKNY.

Forcellati was dealing with a snag having to do with the escalators. A few days earlier, a pipe left from the old steam room had cracked and caused a small section of the ceiling to collapse. (A less romantic theory linked the cracked pipe to the meat department of a more recent tenant, Gristede's.) Forcellati was directing workmen as store staffers pushed trolleys stacked with boxes of Missoni handkerchiefs ("Seventy-five dollars retail, nineteen-ninety-nine at Loehmann's!") and Lilly Pulitzer dresses for kids ("for the stylist's child") past a stack of silvery Dolce & Gabbana high heels ("Every woman's got to have metallic shoes in her closet"). In the so-called Back Room, a section of the store that stocks more expensive designer items ("Here we're looking at the hot labels—hot, hot, hot, hot!"), Forcellati noticed a brown strapless gown with a spangly beaded bodice and a puffy tulle skirt. "Can you imagine a woman coming here and seeing this and *oh my God!*" He held up the dress admiringly. "To find a fifteen-hundred-dollar Oscar de la Renta gown, one of those things that Sarah Jessica Parker might wear on the 'Sex and the City' episode in Paris, for five hundred dollars!"

In the old days of Loehmann's, the Back Room was a cordoned-off room where customers could find sable stoles, glamorous evening wear, and chic suits—but only after taking a number and waiting their turn. Florence Aaron, a New York-born octogenarian, bought her wedding dress at the original Loehmann's, established in 1921, in a Brooklyn car showroom, by Frieda Loehmann, a former department-store buyer. "Mrs. Loehmann used to sit there, ramrod straight, in a tight black blouse and a full black skirt," she recalled. "She had circles of rouge on her cheeks and her hair pulled back in a twist. She looked like a Victorian lady—a Victorian bitch, if you really want to know. Everyone was terrified of her, but she did have good taste."

Forcellati had made his way past a display of discounted Kiehl's products and back to the men's department; racks of Zegna suits occupied a space where, last year, fish counters stood. "There's no communal dressing room for the men!" he said. "That belongs to the women." He wagged his finger emphatically, perhaps to indicate that, whatever may have occurred in times past, this was a fresh start.

—*Patricia Marx*

LOST AND FOUND
PRODIGAL BEAVER

One recent evening, Stephen Sautner sat behind his desk in the Bronx Zoo's administration building, hoping that José hadn't washed away. José is an American beaver, and after Sautner discovered him, in February, during a lunchtime stroll along the Bronx River, the zoo celebrated José as the first beaver to claim New York City residence in more than two hundred years. ("Dam! The Beaver Returns to New York," *Gothamist* reported.) But a month ago a tempest of rain, sleet, and snow submerged José's lodge, a twelve-foot-long, four-foot-high engineering marvel of sticks, rocks, and mud. No one had seen him since.

José

José's forebears had a storied, if strained, relationship with New York. The state once claimed tens of thousands of beavers—Albany was originally named Beverwijck, "district of the beavers"—but, even if the beavers managed to elude John Jacob Astor's traps, then deforestation, factory waste, pop bottles, and discarded tin lizzies evicted them from their watery tenements. For centuries, the best places in the city to see a beaver have been on the city seal, the ceramic tiles of the Astor Place subway station, and the Field House of the Brearley School, home of the Beavers. Tonight's mission: find José.

Sautner, who is just over six feet tall, has the goatee of an avid woodsman ("You should see him throw a hatchet," a friend said). He pulled on a blue North Face Gore-Tex jacket, slung a thermal-imaging night-vision monocular around his neck, and stepped into a pair of waterproof boots. "Beavers are active at night," he said. "Who knows? If we're going to find him, we've got a good shot tonight."

Sautner had invited Eric Sanderson, from the Wildlife Conservation Society, to join the hunt. "Full disclosure," Sanderson said, as the two walked toward the river, past an empty sea-lion pool. "I first thought José might be a muskrat." He went on to explain that José is named for José Serrano, who represents the Bronx in Congress.

The two men hopped an iron railing and hiked gingerly down the riverbank, which was muddy and patched with snow. The floodwaters had receded, and their steps made a sucking sound. On the opposite bank, ten yards from a metal fence surrounding Bronx River Parking B, sat José's lodge. The Bronx River Parkway hummed in the background.

"Right here are the gnawed stumps. And see the bark torn off this willow tree," Sautner said. "Do you remember where the tracks are?"

He pointed to a large brown box strapped to a tree. The device, a camera trap, equipped with a lens and a flash, snaps a photograph whenever something warm breaks its infrared beam. "Hey, it's already registering a picture," he said. "Or maybe that was just me tromping around out here."

"Hear that?" Sautner asked. "That's the sound of a white-naped crane." A Cooper's hawk swooped low over the water, like a stealth bomber. It began to rain.

"Did you hear about the bald eagle in Philly?" Sautner asked. "They found one in the city. They're not saying where—you know, to protect it."

"We really don't know where José came from," Sanderson said. "It's a long way to the next beaver population. But males get kicked out after a year or so, although sometimes they go back home if they can't make it on their own."

"Sounds like college kids," Sautner said.

Then, suddenly, Sautner gesticulated wildly. "Beaver! See it? See it?" Sure enough, José was gliding downstream in the middle of the river, only his head above water, his sinuous body trailing behind like the train of a débutante's gown. And he wasn't stopping. Just in front of Sautner and Sanderson, he turned upstream and began to swim back and forth, carving figure eights. "Wow," Sautner murmured. "It's like he owns the joint."

"It's like we're in a zoo," Sanderson replied. "And that ain't no muskrat."

The two men watched the beaver for several minutes, before Sanderson broke the silence. "I think we're standing on his dinner table," he said. They stepped away from the riverbank, and José, startled, slapped his tail—flat, wide, and hairless—throwing up a starburst of water.

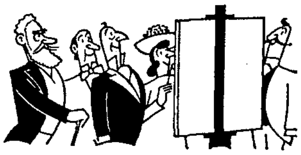
"Oh, I'm so relieved," Sautner said.

Sanderson smiled. "I can't wait until tomorrow. People will ask, 'Has anyone seen the beaver?' "

—*Mike Peed*

CALL ME IN THE MORNING

SAY AHH



A convenient place to have fallen ill one recent evening might have been the Cheim & Read gallery, on West Twenty-fifth Street, where, milling around in front of several large abstract canvases, were a gynecologist, a urologist, a breast-cancer surgeon, an integrative internist, and two orthopedic surgeons. They had gathered at the behest of the painter Malcolm Morley, who is seventy-five. Having logged significant time in medical precincts of late, Morley was moved to found an art-appreciation club for doctors. "You get into really quite an emotional experience when you've broken your hip," he said. "I found that a lot of doctors were interested in art but didn't know how to do anything about it." For this, the group's kickoff meeting, Morley had even invited his dentist, but he was skiing in Colorado.

Morley began painting in the late nineteen-fifties; a Luftwaffe bomb wrecked his boyhood home, in South London, and, after a stint as a galley boy on the tugboat Salvonia and a spree of petty crime, he landed in Wormwood Scrubs prison, where a sympathetic warden supplied him with a set of watercolors. In 1984, he won the inaugural Turner Prize. For the doctors' introductory lesson, he had chosen to discuss the work of his late friend the Abstract Expressionist Joan Mitchell. "I'm not just going to throw them into environmental art or performance art," he said. "I want to give them a painterly experience."

Woodson Merrell, the integrative internist, waited, glass of white wine in hand, for the session to begin. His tastes, judging from the way he described his waiting-room walls, tend toward the figurative—Peter Beard prints, a Buddha statue, Tibetan *tangkas*—but he said that he was curious to learn more about the creative process. "I know I'm going to be inspired," he said. "I need a lot of education in art myself, and this may give me ideas about how to incorporate it into patient care."

Morley started simple, with a discussion of the struggles of postwar American artists to free themselves from Cubism—"Like yogurt that got mixed with milk too many times, it had lost its power," he explained—that culminated in the observation that "painting is essentially an act of transporting a pigment from one place to another. You can throw it, you can splatter it; I was thinking if doctors took up painting they could possibly inject it."

"Would that be drip painting?" someone asked.

Another guest chimed in, "No, that's an I.V.!"

David Kaufman, the urologist, spoke up. (Hanging in his office, he said, is an abstract painting, a gift—"My patients all feel it looks like hieroglyphics.") "You know what I've always wanted to know, Malcolm? Does an artist plan a painting? Does this artist Joan Mitchell have a picture of what it's going to look like in her mind?"

An artist, as much as any cardiologist, operates with intention, Morley began to explain. Someone from the gallery jumped in and started delivering a history of Abstract Expressionism, before being interrupted by Kaufman.

"So what's the answer to my question?"

"You discover painting by doing it," Morley said.

"'Scuse me," said a small figure in a plaid party dress and patent-leather Mary Janes. "Can a painting ever be finished?" One of the orthopedic surgeons had brought along his nine-year-old daughter, Tristan. Morley turned to her, beaming, and said, "That's a wonderful question." He began a disquisition on death and Cézanne, which seemed to raise more questions than it answered.

Kaufman: "So how long would something like this take Joan Mitchell to paint?"

Dean Lorich, Tristan's dad: "When critics look at a new painting, what are they thinking?"

Soon, the conversation expanded to encompass other artistic pursuits.

"Sitting in English class in college, and interpreting writers' intent when they're just sitting down having a good time—I've always been dubious about that," Kenneth Levey, the gynecologist, said.

"Well, James Joyce rewrote a single page a hundred times," Morley said.

"And it still doesn't make any sense," Kaufman retorted.

No one mentioned the other art work in the room, an L.E.D. banner by Jenny Holzer, which hung on the gallery's back wall. The words "the nipple no breast the breasts not mine . . . there is shit in the blood" crawled across its screen in purple pixels—the convergence, perhaps, of art and letters and science.

—*Lauren Collins*

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LETTER FROM EUROPE

ROUND ONE

The battle for France.

BY JANE KRAMER

Late one night toward the end of March, after a day spent listening to too many Frenchmen talk politics, I called room service at my Paris hotel, hoping for a sandwich. "We have ham and Emmental, on toast," the waiter on the phone told me. "Good," I said, "and could you grill the sandwich?" "No, Madame. The menu says ham and cheese; if we grill the sandwich, that would be more like a croque-monsieur." "Agreed," I said. "Make it more like a croque-monsieur." "Alas," he said, "that is not possible. A ham-and-cheese sandwich is never grilled, only when the menu says 'croque-monsieur,' and it does not say 'croque-monsieur.'" It occurred to me then that I was lost in a very French conversation, and never mind that the waiter came from Senegal. He was French now, and our conversation was no different, really, from the ones I'd been having all day with those stock characters from the country's ongoing campaign commedia—the pundits, the *philosophes*, and the pols.

The French are often accused of being trapped in their Cartesian categories. A cold sandwich cannot morph into a hot sandwich without considerable mental accommodation on the part of the person putting it together. In politics, the left cannot creep toward the center, let alone the right, without a deep, if not intolerable, sense of ideological betrayal. The right rarely even considers the possibility of creeping. Change, on the right, is more a matter of cosmetic surgery. For most of the French, the "center"—call it a third way or Clinton's way or Blair's way or simply a free-market, social-democratic consensus—has been a contradiction in terms, perhaps because they remain so deeply devoted to the protective and protectionist state, *l'État protecteur*, that both the left and the right have helped create. The state has been reified, even deified; it carries the imprimatur of a historic compromise with reality.

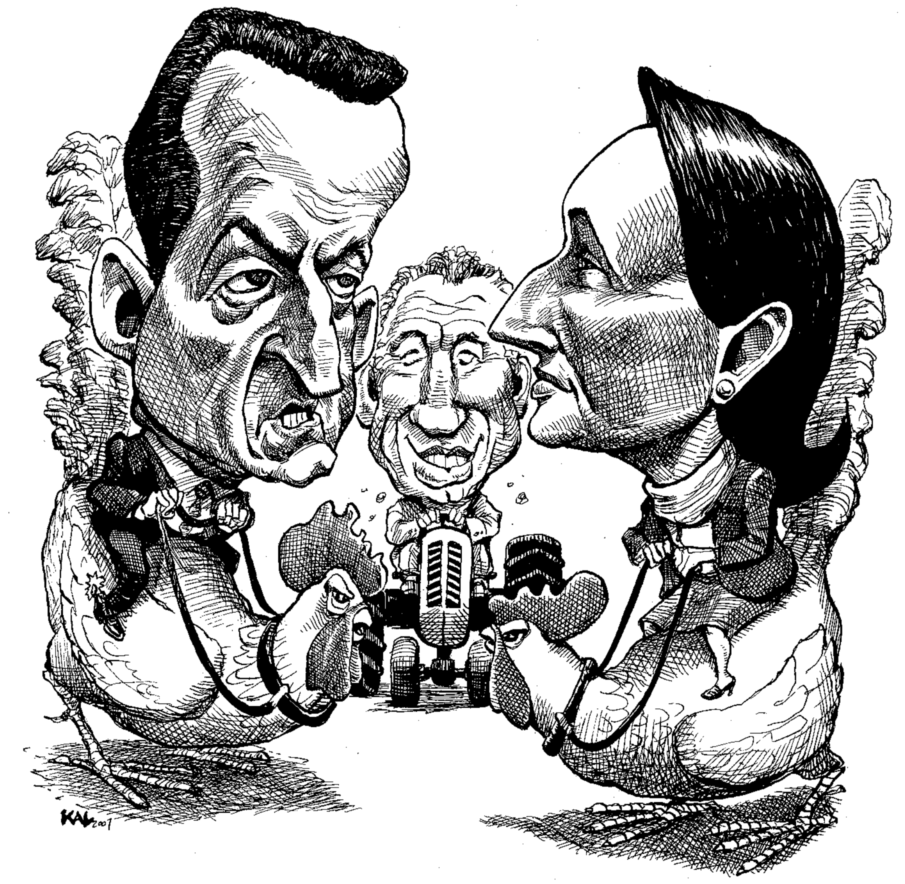
In three weeks, France will have a new President. The first round of elections, which takes place on Sunday, is often referred to as "the protest round," because there are always so many candidates—twelve, this time—and because most of them come from tiny parties. They are against globalization, or Europe, or McDonald's; or they are for nature, or Trotsky, or Joan of Arc. And they serve a useless, if entirely democratic, purpose of letting off electoral steam and airing prejudices, and prolonging the suspense as to whom, really, the majority of the French would like to see in the Élysée. That decision is left for a second round, two weeks later, when the two candidates with the most votes face each other, exhausted from courting the people they have just eliminated. Usually, they are the old faces, making new promises. But occasionally the first Presidential round ends with an upset—which is how Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, having broken with his old party, got to be President in 1974. (He ran as a modern conservative, and went on to divert a large part of the treasury into a stock of imaginary devices that were going to "sniff" offshore oil from the sky.) And it can also end in disaster, as it did in 2002, when, in a moment of collective hysteria over Muslim immigration, Jean-Marie Le Pen, from the National Front, edged out the Socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin. A suitably chastened (or frightened) country then returned its imperious Gaullist President Jacques Chirac to a second term at the Élysée, by the biggest majority in the history of five French republics.

This time, as most of the world knows by now, the Socialist candidate is the somewhat scattered, "something for everyone" president of the region in central France called Poitou-Charentes, Ségolène Royal, and the conservative candidate is the tightly wired and, until last month, famously uncensored interior minister, from the rich Paris suburb of Neuilly, Nicolas Sarkozy. A month ago, Ségo and

Sarko, as the papers call them, were pretty much equal in the polls, but they were closely pursued by François Bayrou, the avowedly centrist president of Giscard's party, the Union for French Democracy, or U.D.F. The Party itself is small—only twenty-seven deputies in the National Assembly—but Bayrou had had the audacity to suggest that France might thrive in Europe, and perhaps the world, if it forgot its outworn categories of left and right and left Descartes in the seventeenth century.

Bayrou is hardly a new face—he has been a National Assembly deputy, a European deputy, and, for five years in the nineteen-nineties, an education minister—though at the time he was enjoying a short run as the candidate of youth, vigor, and the future. So were Sarkozy and Royal, who have spent their entire lives in politics. Royal embraced the image; Sarkozy, who is campaigning on experience, finally said, "Let's not exaggerate. We're all in our fifties!" But Bayrou's idea—to create a pro-Europe, pro-market, social-democratic parliamentary bloc: a party, really, that would draw its membership from progressives on the left and the right—was new, and appealing. It was even suggested that, if Bayrou made it through to the second round, enough French men and women would be so relieved at the prospect of categorical escape that they would elect him President. It didn't take long for the thought of escape to make people nervous. Where would they go? And, more to the point, would they still be "France"? Alain Duhamel, the chief political commentator at RTL, told me, "The myth is that the French love the new, but it's not true. They hate change. When it comes to change, I'd say we're somewhere back in your Wilson era." Today, the best that can be said for Bayrou's chances is that more than forty per cent of the country's voters are still wondering what to do.

France is in trouble. Everyone agrees on that. There is so much contempt for the country's old political class that the three main candidates, for all their differences, speak to the same malaise. None have been prime minister, and Bayrou is the only one to have run for President before (in 2002). Nor are they children of the establishment. They come from families demonstrably on the "outside." Royal's father was an Army lieutenant colonel. Bayrou's was a farmer. Sarkozy's was a Hungarian émigré with a half-Jewish wife, and he was in the advertising business. And they are all, in their own way, running on promises to fix the system in place before it crashes. Their most obvious challenge is economic. The country has stalled. Its growth is minimal. Its protectionist policies are disastrously out of touch with the global reality, let alone with the realities of the European Union, which it helped to found and enlarge (and then to undermine, in 2005, when it voted against an E.U. constitution). Its business, beyond the realm of luxury labels and designer clothes that the rich will always pay for, is not competitive. Its fear of the market is endemic, although, to be fair, that fear involves a reluctance to import the kind of social attrition it sees in America now. Attrition, of course, takes many forms, and the French form can be just as punishing: an unemployment rate of more than eight per cent, and as much as forty per cent in the big housing projects and immigrant neighborhoods where most of the country's five or six million Muslims, the majority of them second- and third-generation French citizens, live. In the fall of 2005, thousands of young men from those projects—or, as the people who live there call them, *les cités*—took to the streets for a month of unabated rioting, to protest the lack of jobs, and even the prospect of jobs, in the land of "liberty, equality, and fraternity." (Part of the problem is education; the rest is simply French xenophobia and racism.) Yet there is still so much resistance to economic reform—"reform," in France, is a code for "Mrs. Thatcher"—that Sarkozy has been the only candidate willing to admit that the country will have to accept layoffs in the private sector, and reduce a massive public sector that eats up nearly forty-five per cent of the national budget.



The Presidential candidates: Nicolas Sarkozy, François Bayrou, and Ségolène Royal.

KEVIN KAL KALLAUGHER

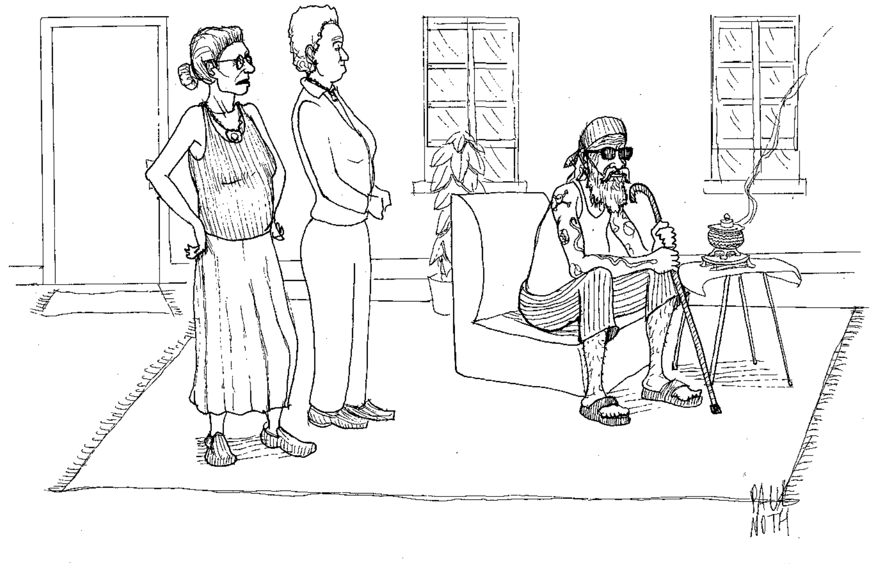
I went to see Bayrou at the end of a week when Sarkozy and Royal had stopped attacking each other in order to attend to the more pressing business of dealing with him—the campaign wisdom on each side being that he would be much easier to derail during the first-round scramble than in the relative tranquillity of a second-round run-up, when the choice was no longer about the best of all possible imaginary worlds but about two hungry candidates whom most voters may have already come to loathe. It is hard to loathe Bayrou, although he is arguably just as hungry. He is a historian who once taught at a lycée in Béarn, in the French Pyrenees; today, he raises horses on the family farm. Duhamel, who supports Bayrou, thinks he was "cunning, opportunistic, and astute" in reinventing himself as a farmer-historian come to Paris, like a Balzac rustic, to save France, and its moderates, from the ur-nationalists who now account for the swing votes in both the Gaullist and the Socialist camps. The journalist Christine Ockrent calls him "the Lampedusa of the campaign." She told me, "He says, 'I come from the farm, I know the seasons. Ergo I know everything.' It's a way of saying, 'Everything will change, but nothing will change.'"

His volunteers adore him. His staff is smart, friendly, and enthusiastic. His headquarters, on the Rue de l'Université, are at the end of a courtyard of smokers that anyone can enter. (Sarkozy's headquarters, in a tougher neighborhood across the river, are guarded like a fortress; and Royal's inner sanctum, on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, is closed to anyone who is not invited.) There are few slogans at Bayrou's. A plain orange sign over a glass door says, simply, "*Campagne de François Bayrou.*" ("All the other colors were taken," he told me.) And Bayrou himself appears to be what the French call *décontracté*—relaxed, informal, and attentive. He talks to reporters alone, without the usual contingent of scribes and handlers, and he talks slowly, putting his thoughts together, though some of his critics claim that this has more to do with mastering the remnants of a childhood stutter than with rapt attention. His office is full of history books, and the only rusticity I found on the upper reaches of the 7th Arrondissement was a toy tractor on his desk. He was dressed in gray pants, a sports jacket, and an oxford shirt, and, if his plans for France were radical or impertinent, they were indeed filtered through the pointedly soothing persona of a man who represents all that is constant and dependable in French life.

We talked about Henri IV—the subject of a biography he wrote while minding the store at the education ministry—and about Henri's meeting with Michel de Montaigne, who said that the king and Catholicism were the two parts of his life he accepted without skepticism, presumably in order to clear his mind for more interesting thoughts. Bayrou is a devout Catholic, with six children and a wife who lives on the farm. He has an almost eerily calm confidence. "He thinks that God has chosen him to be President, that he was predestined," the writer (and Socialist supporter) Olivier Duhamel told me. "It is a grand megalomania." But given that the first time Bayrou ran for President his share of the vote was less than seven per cent, one would have to assume that he now knows better. He sees no contradiction between his Catholicism and what he calls his deep secularism. "The Pope is not a subject of reflection for me," he said, when I asked him about the Vatican's latest "non-negotiable" Apostolic Exhortation, instructing Catholic politicians to follow the Church's orders on moral issues. "I make Pascal's distinction. As a public figure, I am a citizen, not a Catholic; I do not obey the Church."

Most people agree that Bayrou's years as minister of education went by with a noticeable lack of inspiration or even activity. (I was told that even Chirac, who gave him the job, complained.) He says, in his own defense, that there wasn't a lot he could do to revive a system held hostage to a teachers' union with more than a million members, many of whom took to the streets to protest the first—and last—bill he introduced. (It involved allowing the state to bankroll parochial-school construction; he withdrew it fast.) But he acknowledges the problem. "I went to a tiny lycée in a tiny town in the Pyrenees, and I had the same good education I would have had at the best lycée in Paris," he told me. "That is not possible anymore." He said that, for years, most of the education budget has been squandered in administration—"We are excessively administered in this country"—and that too many politicians have fostered unrealistic expectations and offered up fake solutions to those expectations, most notably Lionel Jospin, one of his predecessors at the education ministry and the man who decreed that eighty per cent of France's students would be eligible to go to college, when what the country needed was four thousand more butchers and at least as many new plumbers.

Bayrou has a plan for France that he says will add no more than twenty-one billion euros to its working budget—much less than Sarkozy's or Royal's programs would probably cost—and he says it will be entirely financed by administrative savings. It is hard to see how he can promise that without firing a lot of heavily protected people, but his appeal has never been in the details. It is in his vision of a strong Europe, and of France as a modern European state, and of a party



"He's arranged to have his ashes snorted by Keith Richards."

that serves those imperatives, and of the institutional overhaul that would help this happen. "I am very European," he told me. He refuses to hedge or compromise on that. He thinks that the country has been lost in a fantastical dream of French power and French status and would feel much better about itself, and possibly even feel more "French," if it started looking for a reasonable path to prosperity instead. The Socialist Jacques Delors, who put in ten remarkable years as the head of the European Commission, and was often urged to run for President himself, told me, "There was a time, in '86, when maybe I should have said to *my* party, 'Are you for a market economy, an *économie en marche*? Because if not, I'll leave.' "

"We are going to live in a multipolar world, with seven or eight huge groupings," Bayrou said. "America, Europe, China, the rest. I am not for a bigger Europe. We have to stop this enlargement, and we have to say no to Turkey. What we need is a *stronger* Europe. First, for any equilibrium between China and the rest of the world, because right now the relation is a little dangerous. And, also, for the Middle East, because Britain and France are the only powers with long experience there. We have to try to work this out together. And to do this we need a new referendum on Europe. And to win that referendum we need to create a new majority, a democratic party that will get us out of the nationalist clutches of the left and right. It isn't easy, but it's possible—and that's politics."

Bayrou once said that he could easily live with a Socialist prime minister. He mentioned Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who is considered to have been his party's best finance minister; and Bernard Kouchner, the founder of Médecins sans Frontières, who was arguably its best health minister, and who still tops the annual polls for France's most popular politician. Strauss-Kahn said, "The question is irrelevant. I am a man of the left." Kouchner (who is married to Ockrent, though not politically) told me, "The question for me is this: Will Ségolène be clever enough, visionary enough, to open the door to ideas the center could support? I am pushing her to do this, but maybe it's not possible. Bayrou is fighting against the dictatorship of the left and the right. My second choice is him." When I asked Bayrou if he would still ask them, he told me, "They dream of nothing else."

But it may be Bayrou who's dreaming. It is unlikely that many French politicians will be eager to cut their old, profitable party affiliations for an untried *rassemblement* of pro-European liberals in a country that voted such a resounding no to Europe's constitution. "Europe" remains a hard French sell, though France has arguably reaped its blessings in subsidies and tariffs. Even some people from the U.D.F. worry that the broad new party Bayrou proposes would leave the nationalists and protectionists and state socialists on both sides of the political spectrum dangerously marginalized—the loose cannons of a new system. Bayrou says that the answer is "a system of partly proportional representation, something like Germany's," and a parliament with much more authority and independence than the National Assembly has now. Maybe. There is certainly nothing sacred about France's electoral laws. Other Presidents have changed them. Mitterrand did, when he thought it was to his advantage. So did Chirac. (They both suffered through several years of what the French call "cohabitation"; namely, one side in the Élysée and the other in government in the Matignon.) Bayrou is right when he says that the problem today is "structural." But he is not alone in saying it.

Last month, Ségolène Royal trumped Bayrou's quiet idea for a stronger parliamentary system, dressed it up in the flag, and called it the Sixth Republic. The crowds loved that, but Socialist "elephants," as the Old Guard of the Party is called, were stunned, since she hadn't bothered to tell them, or even, it was rumored, to tell her partner of twenty-six years, the Socialist Party secretary François Hollande. (She denies this.) I did not see Royal on this trip. She talks to reporters even less than she talks to other Socialists, and she is especially wary of the American press—perhaps because she has not decided what the proper attitude of a would-be French President toward the United States should be. When you call her headquarters, and ask to speak to the foreign-press secretary, you are switched to an intern from Sciences Po who says, "*Pas possible*" and hangs up fast.

I did meet Royal on an earlier trip, the morning after she had won the presidency of Poitou-Charentes (roundly beating the prime minister's protégée for the job), and she was in high spirits. "Imagine me, the president of a whole region! *C'est bon!*" she said, when I offered my congratulations. It was undeniably refreshing, if not entirely ingenuous. Royal is a phenomenon. She says so herself. French politics are notoriously macho: her own father, whom the family followed from post to post, is said to have talked about having "five children, and three girls"; and, despite a parity law, the parliament she sits in today has the lowest proportion of women in Western Europe. But her success has less specifically to do with gender—she isn't the first woman to have risen fast and high in French politics—than with her extraordinary effect on ordinary people. Part of this is her considerable beauty, which she puts to pointed, patriotic effect with red or white blazers and floaty print skirts. With her long brown hair, flipped up at the ends, and her artfully fresh face, she looks like Marianne—the symbolic face of Republican France that you see on town-hall statues and postage stamps. She doesn't shrink from the comparison. She knows that a lot of the French would rather have a mythical Marianne, in a designer jacket, than another Mitterrand or Chirac—the men who controlled French politics for the past quarter century.

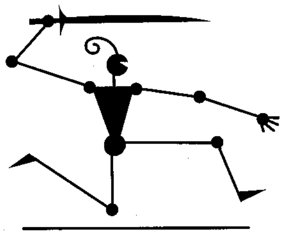
But Royal is the first woman to have come so far with no real backing from a President or from a party. The elephants were, in fact, determined to see her fail. She outwitted them all. Jack Lang, Mitterrand's old culture minister, who had wanted the nomination for years and is now a "special adviser" to her campaign, calls her "a woman of steel and imagination," and even her rivals give her credit for determination. "Look, she's got balls, monstrous balls," Bayrou's close friend and strategist Philippe Lapousterle told me. "Sure, she's a beautiful woman, she's a reassuring woman, but mainly she understood that the old Socialist left was finished, and she said 'Fuck all!' to the elephants, she went right past them."

Her appeal is undeniable, if difficult to explain. Her command of the issues seems minimal. She has produced a hundred-point manifesto, drawn from a year of meetings and Internet conversations with "the French people," and she says, when pressed, "It is the French people who will decide." In March, she fielded some very tough questions from Christine Ockrent, by far the smartest journalist on French television, and a panel of "guest experts." For two hours, she managed to avoid giving anything like a concrete answer. (She says that her job is the "vision," and that she has experts of her own for details.) She was implacably pleasant. She sat through those two hours with a frozen smile and she left her interlocutors glaring with irritation, or, in the case of a few, laughing. (Sarkozy, who appeared the next night, had answers to spare, and he could rattle off facts to support them.) But the voters who watched Royal were, by some reports, delighted with the performance.

Patrick Jarreau, the deputy editor of *Le Monde*, told me, "You have to realize that she has strong convictions, it's just that they aren't about the usual political subjects. She talks about family, the relations between generations. She worries about the media, about pornography and violence. Her style is very different from Sarko's. She has an ability to listen, to focus on the daily lives of people—the people who feel that 'politics,' for all its details, never really took them into account before." He's right about that. Royal is a feminist, and French politics has been a male preserve for so long that "daily life" and "family" had all but disappeared from the discourse until she came along. The Web site that produced her manifesto—it's called desirsdavenir.org, or "wishes for the future"—has been compared to Hillary Clinton's "conversation" with the American people, but the similarity stops there. Everybody gets his or her wish in Royal's platform, and the only subject left hanging is how to pay for it all. (One page of her "hundred points" that I picked at random included: raising the monthly minimum wage to fifteen hundred euros, which means a little more than two thousand dollars; raising the lowest retirement benefits by five per cent; raising benefits for the handicapped by five per cent; doubling the annual subsidy for schoolchildren; reducing bank charges; and guaranteeing housing for life.) Campaigning, she can sound like a social democrat one day and a socialist out of the nineteen-thirties the next. Sometimes she loves immigrants, sometimes she loves the police more. Sometimes she wants to pay businesses to provide job training for the unemployable, sometimes she wants to raise their taxes. Last month, the Party's chief economic adviser, Eric Besson, got so frustrated by her shifting stands that he quit both his job and the Party. She is "heavily incompetent," he said. "I wouldn't wish it on my country."

No one besides Besson has actually quit an important job in Royal's campaign, but many of her advisers complain, like him, that—however much she listens to the people—she has not been listening to them. The truth is that collegiality is not her style. She is running, as much as a Socialist candidate can, on her independence, and she has reason to. Her party has done little except try to sabotage her since the campaign began. Her partner, Hollande, with whom she has four children and a sort of Hillary-Bill arrangement, had wanted the nomination himself. So had Jospin. And so had the two most powerful elephants, Strauss-Kahn and Laurent Fabius, Mitterrand's second prime minister. This was arguably their last shot at the Presidency, and they fought bitterly, and stupidly, against Royal for the nomination. "Who's going to look after the children?" Fabius said, blowing his chances with one egregious sentence.

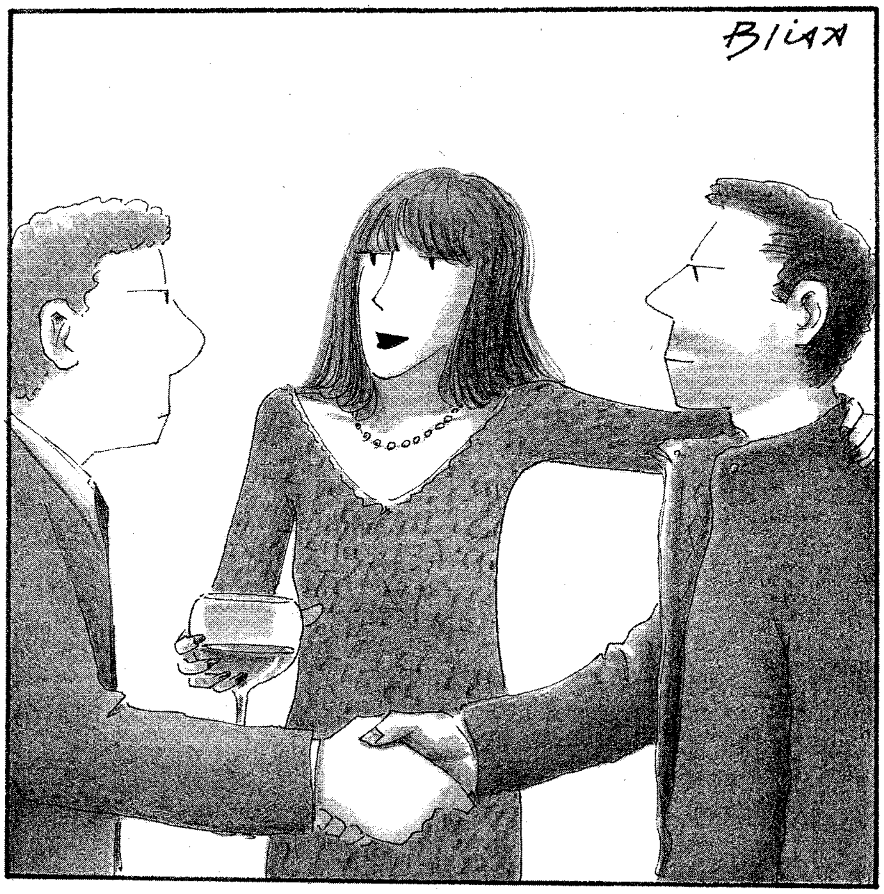
In the end, it was the Socialist rank and file—two hundred and twenty thousand members, voting in November—who chose Royal. "She made her way by going outside the Party to the people in the Party," Patrick Jarreau, at *Le Monde*, says. "No one knows how she did it, but she captured their imagination." And Ockrent told me, after the program, "She's a fairy tale, our Alice in Wonderland. She makes the real world dissolve. She's limited. She hasn't digested the very complex issues. But she's persuasive. Remember, she's the girl who managed to persuade her mother and seven brothers and sisters to sue the father who abandoned them, and refused to pay. She was twenty years old when she did it, and she won!"



Today, after a brief flirtation with the elephants, who promised to stump for her and then, to all intents and purposes, disappeared, she makes her allies where she finds them. Her "Sixth Republic" came from Arnaud Montebourg, a young deputy whom she herself had suspended for a month in January. Her most ardent campaigner has been an ex-Trotskyite named Julien Dray; the young, radical voters like him. She gets more help from Jean-Pierre Chevènement, a testy "left-nationalist" who broke with the Socialists years ago to form his own party (and who helped deliver the vote against Europe in the referendum of 2005), than from anyone in what could properly be called her own camp. The old Socialist big shots are pretty much consigned to party headquarters, five minutes away from her real one, where they tend to the public face of the campaign from a covered courtyard dripping with red roses and dominated by a huge television monitor, endlessly replaying Royal's speeches. Not even Lang, who's supposed to be advising the campaign, seems to know what she is going to do or say from one minute to the next.

"She has a very strong temperament," Lang told me. "She needs to focus—to talk about employment, education, housing, and economic competitiveness, and for this she needs to be a *chef de guerre*, she needs to delegate. Of course, if she's President, she will have to delegate. But right now it's too personal." And her close friend and legal adviser to the campaign Jean-Pierre Mignard—one of the few people she is said to trust—told me, "You have to understand that she's exhausted. You have to appreciate the fact that this is her second battle. Her first one was within her own party, and it was very hard for her. The party that was supposed to help her didn't belong to her. The other candidates were in charge. She has had to build a completely new organization in a few weeks. Neither Sarkozy nor Bayrou has that problem—they *are* their parties. And perhaps she is too meticulous, and because of this she wants to control everything. She has some very rich themes, but what she needs now is some help to extract the nuggets, because maybe her message is too rich."

Or perhaps the message is too confused. "Even I am astonished when she starts talking," Mignard said. "One day it's Jeanne d'Arc. She wants to take back the patriotic heroine for the left." (Until Royal discovered her, Joan of Arc was mainly the property of old royalists and the National Front.) "She calls her 'my little sister of Lorraine.' And she talks about de Gaulle! It's like 'La Marseillaise.' You never heard 'La Marseillaise' before at a Socialist meeting. Now you do. But now Ségolène has to say *why* you do—that she will be a President of reconciliation." A few days later, Royal announced that she hoped to see the tricolor hanging in every French window on Bastille Day. Olivier Duhamel, who supports Royal, described the state of the campaign this way: "Her problem isn't that everybody in the campaign hates everybody else. That's a given. Her problem is that there is no 'Ségolène' story. She hasn't arrived at a story for France—at a clear vision. She needs a narrative."



"Honey, this is Jack. He's the one who taught me how to do that thing you like."

Nobody tells Nicolas Sarkozy to find a campaign narrative. Many of the people around him tell him to go easy on the one he already has, because the message is harsh—not, in any event, the thick soup of Ségolène Royal's message, or the new European on the old French tractor of François Bayrou's. Sarkozy is relentless. He has will, ego, energy, and an almost embarrassing ambition to be President of France. Chirac, who once considered Sarkozy his heir apparent, now finds him so distasteful (not to mention treacherous, for having backed another candidate at their party's nominating Convention twelve years ago) that he murmured one brief, chilly endorsement, late in March, and has not mentioned Sarkozy in public since then. Royal's ambition is cloaked in populist concern; she may have won more votes by laying a gentle hand on the shoulder of a handicapped man at one of her public meetings with "the people" than by anything she said that night. Bayrou's is cloaked in those long moments of reflection and in the occasional, assiduously modest use of the answer "I don't know." Sarkozy never says, "I don't know." He is impatient and in command. He never makes the kinds of gaffes that Royal made when she praised the Chinese on the speed and efficiency of their justice system, or smiled politely when a Hezbollah leader compared Israel to Nazi Germany, or told reporters that it might be a good idea for Quebec to secede from Canada. The only time Sarkozy has been known to slip that badly was in an interview on Radio Monte Carlo this year, when, after a lot of verbal squirming, he tried to cover for the fact that he didn't know if Al Qaeda was Sunni or Shiite.

He is notoriously controlling—not because he can't let go, like Royal, but because he doesn't want to. He has a good grasp of France's economic problems. In America, many of his proposals would sound middle-of-the-road, or at least interesting. One is to offer tax breaks to people willing to work longer than the official thirty-five-hour week, as well as to the companies that employ them. (Bayrou's plan is to give those breaks to any company that will hire two new people.) Another is to upgrade the country's apprenticeship system, including its technical-high-school training, in the hope of eventually providing jobs. His competence is not in question. (Alain Duhamel describes the difference between Sarkozy and Bayrou by saying, "I'd want dinner with Bayrou, and Sarko for a working lunch.") What is in question is his character.

Sarkozy, to his enemies, means new power, new money, and a big chip on the shoulder. They see him as an angry outsider to the old political ruling class—as much a stranger to the etiquette of inclusion as any of the immigrant kids he has vowed to tame with a power hose—and it makes them nervous. "*Il me fait peur*," people say. They may be hard put to explain why, exactly, he scares them, but he does. Some say that something—a kind of personal gravitas—is missing. Some say that he's shameless, "like an American." Others complain that he wears his insecurities on his sleeve, and that those insecurities have nothing to do with the fact that his father was foreign or that he never went to the École Nationale d'Administration. And they are right, for the most part. But Sarkozy has one big virtue. He talks straight. Once, in a debate with Le Pen, he said that, by Le Pen's definition of Frenchness by blood, "I wouldn't be French—don't you think that would be a shame?" It was worth a thousand words on the subject of jus sanguinis.

The real trouble with Sarkozy is that he is not demonstrably democratic. Few politicians are, but Sarkozy is at a disadvantage, having put in five highly visible years as an interior minister that included the month of rioting in the projects in 2005, and a brief resurgence of violence earlier this spring in Paris. He doesn't pretend to listen to "the people." When rules get in his way, he walks right over them, or he changes them. "He is unafraid," his communications director, Jean-Michel Goudard, told me. "He doesn't want you to like him. He wants you to help him get things done." His answer to the country's vote against a European constitution is to rewrite the constitution, hand it to parliament, and tell parliament to vote yes. He has been known to threaten the press over articles he didn't like (*Libération*) or to exact revenge when he has been embarrassed. When his wife, Cécilia, had a serious fling in New York last year, and the paparazzi caught up with her and her boyfriend, he called his friend Arnaud Lagardère, the owner of *Paris Match*, and Lagardère obligingly fired the editor-in-chief who had signed off on publishing the pictures. (Both men deny there was any pressure.) Cécilia came back, after which Sarkozy added a notably un-French confession to his campaign autobiography, saying that whatever problems they'd had were all his fault—that he loved her and she loved him, but that his passion for France had made him inattentive. He promised her the stars and the moon forever, and since then she has played a strong role in his campaign. When I saw Sarkozy last month at the ministry and asked about the two men who would be sitting in on our interview, I was told, "One comes from Cécilia, the other from Nicolas."

Sarkozy is small, agitated, abrasive, and aggressive. He walked into our interview at nine-thirty on a Saturday morning dressed in a blue suit and tie. He had just been interviewed on a news-cum-rock radio show that is said to be the one thing in France guaranteed to get your teen-ager out of bed at eight on weekends, but he could have been at a business breakfast. He put some logs into the fireplace in his office—a beautiful pale room in a small palace on the Place Beauvau—and sat down and waited. There were no pleasantries, no little attempts at conversation, just Sarkozy's right foot tapping on the floor and a look on his face that said, Don't waste time. I asked him to tell me what was wrong with France. "Work," he said. "In this country, work isn't encouraged, it has no value. We're in a crisis that comes from a very false idea of solidarity—the idea that you have to give as much to the person who doesn't work as to the one who does. The élites have been wrong about this for decades. They have betrayed the idea of equality and given us egalitarianism." I brought up the grim projects across the ring roads of every French city—hundreds of neighborhoods where young people are so disaffected and angry that the police are reluctant to enter, and where Sarkozy himself is largely unwelcome to campaign. "The voters there aren't scared of me," he said. "They are the ones who ask me to do something. Why else am I in first place in the polls? I have been interior minister for five years. I am efficient. I get things done. I say this in my campaign: the risk isn't change, the risk is to refuse change."

Sarkozy calls change "rupture." "Look, to take action in this country is already a rupture," he told me. He likes strong words. In the summer of 2005, he threatened to blast one of the *cités* clean with a Kärcher, the kind of power hose that police use to dissolve graffiti. When the riots broke out four months later, in another of the *cités*—after two young Muslims fleeing a police search were fatally electrocuted in the power substation where they hid—he called the rioters "scum." Even today, many people hold him responsible for the fact that those riots went on for so long and became so violent, and they are convinced that if he is elected the projects will explode again. "I'm not afraid of words," Sarkozy said. We were talking about his plan to create a "ministry of immigration and national identity"—he had just announced it—and a lot of people were shocked, because in France "national identity" is a very strong term. It means Le Pen, and "white" and "Christian" and "born here." Before Le Pen, those words hadn't been used, publicly, since Vichy. "This idea of 'national identity' is more than dangerous," Bernard Kouchner told me. "Changing French life is good, but this is about enforcement."

No one doubted that Sarkozy was making a pitch to Le Pen voters, telling them that, however they voted in the first round, he wanted their vote in the second—that he understood their concerns. A few of Sarkozy's own people even thought it was a good idea. But not that many. Simone Veil, who had just agreed to be president of his honorary campaign committee, announced coldly that she preferred "immigration and integration." And Azouz Begag, the French-Algerian equal-opportunities minister, who had often com-

SHOTGUN BAR MITZVAH

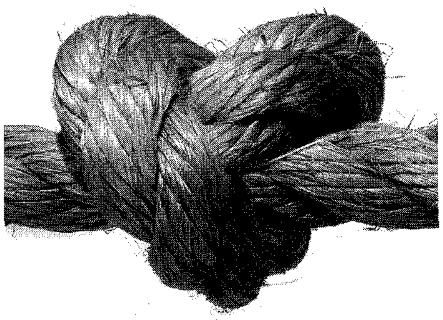
plained about Sarkozy's language, quit the government last week, and even accused Sarkozy of having threatened him. Sarkozy defends his strategy. He asked me which was better: to acknowledge the fear that Le Pen represents, or to sit back and watch a quarter of the country vote for him. "What's the taboo in 'identity'?" he asked me. "We are not an ethnicity, we are not a group of religions, we are republicans. The meaning, the values, of French 'identity' is clear. It means laicity, sexual equality, opportunity. I believe in a mix, not in communitarianism, and, when you forget those national values, communitarianism is what you get. . . . Immigration? That's France in thirty years. So I want to have institutions that function. We have to accept borders. We have to accept the rule of the majority. We have to give preferences to communities in need—in education, say, but we do not need to change education, we need to protect it by giving support to the people who deserve it." He said that not everyone caught in the myth of an egalitarian France is served by a university education with no job in sight at the end of a long degree.

He is an odd mix himself. Some of his plans for the economy make sense. He believes—as Bayrou and even Royal do—that business needs a break in France, and that it needs it now. But at the same time he is a classic French protectionist. "I'm for a free market, but on the basis of reciprocity," he said. "And what do I mean by reciprocity? Look at America's import restrictions. Look at China's. They protect themselves, and it hurts our factories. I'm not for liberalism *pur et dur*. I want to put an import tax on carbon emissions for countries not respecting the Kyoto treaty." He says he is "European," but lately he has been making the rest of Europe nervous, demanding an "economic government" in Brussels—by which he means putting exchange-rate policy in the hands of euro-zone politicians, and seriously weakening the independence of the European Central Bank. (Most of those politicians read this as a demand to put the euro at the service of French industry.) His aides have been left with the job of getting the word to Brussels that you can't run for President of France right now without demanding it. He told me, "Europe can't depend only on competition. I won this nomination because my policies are pragmatic."

Brice Hortefeux, the deputy interior minister and one of Sarkozy's oldest friends, said, "What he has to do now is to demonstrate his best qualities, to show that he is not only a fighter but a protector—that he will protect the people who work, that he will protect the consumer, and most important, that he is the protector of our citizens, the one who fights crime for their security."

Sarkozy has been leading the polls by as much as seven points, with Royal second and Bayrou third, but it's really impossible to say who will be President of France when the last vote is counted, on May 6th. Philippe Lapousterle, from Bayrou's campaign, told me, "Bayrou is absolutely original, and absolutely determined. Psychologically, politically, personally, structurally—however you want to put it, the others are not up to him or the job." And Jean-Pierre Mignard, from Royal's, said, "Royal is running a historic campaign, and she has to succeed, because we are making a revolution. A soft revolution, but still a revolution. All three candidates agree on what the revolution should mean: the end of the demonization of capitalism; the end of the schizophrenic split in French political life; the end of the old class wars. But there can be either a strong solution—that's Sarkozy's way. Or a democratic solution—that's Ségolène." As for Sarkozy's people, they say he will win, *point final*.

Christine Ockrent described his chances this way: "He desperately wants to be elected. He has even started running campaign commercials saying that he wants to strengthen the welfare state, though he 'promises' to punish anyone who takes advantage of it, or cheats. He has this almost physical desire to act, and he's extremely sincere in that. He's the only heir whom Chirac hasn't managed to kill. He's part of the world we live in at its frenetic pace. That world—the risk, the obscene money—that's Sarko. But do the French want to be exposed to that? If that's what they want, he'll win. But I'm not sure that they want to join the real world. Most of the old political crowd—they know nothing about globalization, about the economy. Not even the businessmen do. They are political, but they are not tied to politics. If they want the illusion of their nice French shelter, Sarkozy will lose." ♦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Boston's mystery man.

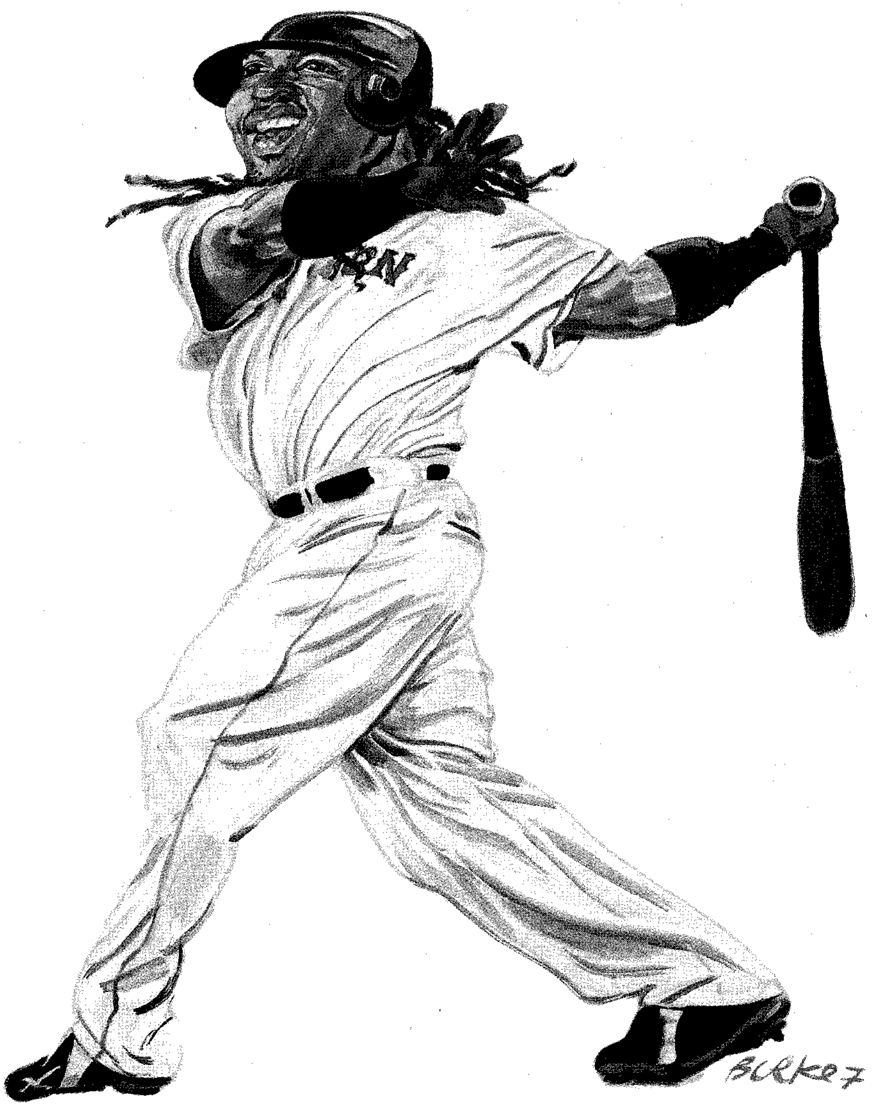
BY BEN McGRATH

Manny Ramirez is a deeply frustrating employee, the kind whose talents are so prodigious that he gets away with skipping meetings, falling asleep on the job, and fraternizing with the competition. He makes more money than everyone else at the company yet somehow escapes the usual class resentment, and even commands more respect from the wage slaves, who suspect he is secretly one of them, than from his colleagues in business class. It's not that he is anti-establishment, exactly, but in his carefree way he's just subversive enough—"affably apathetic" is how one of his bosses put it recently—to create headaches for any manager who worries about precedent. Despite his generous compensation, he is sufficiently ungrateful to let it be known that he would be happier working elsewhere. He is also, for a man of stature, strangely sensitive, and although his brilliance is accompanied by sloppiness, one criticizes him, as with a wayward teenager, at the risk of losing him to bouts of brooding and inaccessibility.

Ramirez, now entering his seventh season with the Boston Red Sox, is the best baseball player to come out of the New York City public-school system since Sandy Koufax, and by many accounts the greatest right-handed hitter of his generation, though attempts to locate him in time and space, as we shall see, inevitably miss the mark. He is perhaps the closest thing in contemporary professional sports to a folk hero, an unpredictable public figure about whom relatively little is actually known but whose exploits, on and off the field, are recounted endlessly, with each addition punctuated by a shrug and the observation that it's just "Manny being Manny." When I asked his teammate David Ortiz, himself a borderline folk hero, how he would describe Ramirez, he replied, "As a crazy motherfucker." Then he pointed at my notebook and said, "You can write it down just like that: 'David Ortiz says Manny is a crazy motherfucker.' That guy, he's in his own world, on his own planet. Totally different human being than everyone else." Ortiz is not alone in emphasizing that Ramirez's originality resonates at the level of species. Another teammate, Julian Tavarez, recently told a reporter from the Boston *Herald*, "There's a bunch of humans out here, but to Manny, he's the only human."

Ramirez, who was born in Santo Domingo in 1972 and moved to the heavily Dominican neighborhood of Washington Heights, in northern Manhattan, when he was thirteen, still spoke little English by the time he was drafted, and he remains a man of few words. Those words, however, have a way of sounding aphoristic: "All I need to see is the ball," or "Do what makes you happy." In 1999, after he'd established himself as a superstar with the Cleveland Indians, written messages began appearing on the backs of his cleats, like admonitions from a prophet: "There will be hell to pay"; "Justice will be served"; "Can't we all get along?"; "Live and let die." Greg Brown, a journeyman minor-league catcher who worked out with Ramirez last winter, said, "Sometimes I think it's Manny's world, and we all just exist in it."

According to lore, Ramirez has, or had, two Social Security numbers and five active driver's licenses—none of which he managed to present to the of-



"That guy, he's in his own world, on his own planet," a teammate says of Ramirez.

ficer who pulled him over in 1997 for driving with illegally tinted windows and the stereo blasting at earsplitting volume. "The cop knew who he was," as Sheldon Ocker, the Indians beat reporter for the Akron *Beacon Journal*, tells it. "He said, 'Manny, I'm going to give you a ticket.' Manny says, 'I don't need any tickets, I can give *you* tickets,' and reaches for the glove compartment. Then he leaves the scene by making an illegal U-turn and he gets *another* ticket."

Ramirez's appearance—he styles his hair in dreadlocks, wears a uniform cut for a sumo wrestler, and smiles broadly and indiscriminately—hints at this extracurricular flakiness, and even gives off a whiff of pothead. (In 2002, he requested that the song "Good Times," by Styles P, be played over the Fenway Park P.A. system before one of his at-bats, and unsuspecting fans were treated to lyrics such as "Every day I need a ounce and a half... take a blunt, just to ease the pain... I get high, high, high.") During pitching changes at Fenway, he has been known to disappear behind a door in the left-field wall, and on one occasion he nearly missed the resumption of play—an averted transgression that he at one point blamed on his bladder.

In the outfield and on the base paths, Ramirez can seem oafish and clumsy, and many of the baseball-related incidents for which he is best known reflect a chronic absent-mindedness, but I prefer the most Roy Hobbsian anecdote, in which he hits a home run with a broken bat—it was broken *before* he swung, that is, and he used it anyway because he was fond of it—since it illustrates both his enthusiasm and his preternatural gift for hitting. He is an intensely serious batter who practices with greater determination than almost any other, but the magic in his swing—minimal stride, maximal weight shift—comes from somewhere within. He is thick but not big by today's standards, about six feet and two hundred pounds, and without the sculpted Hulk Hogan physique that has become the norm, yet only Mark McGwire, Harmon Killebrew, and Babe Ruth hit four hundred and fifty home runs more quickly than Ramirez, and only Lou Gehrig, who, like Ramirez, spent his formative years practicing in Manhattan's Highbridge Park, hit more grand slams.

In Boston, where the "knights of the keyboard," in Ted Williams's famous formulation, cover baseball the way affairs of state are covered in Washington, Ramirez remains a phenomenon more discussed than understood. They share sightings, transcribe every utterance, and speculate about the induction speech he'll give in Cooperstown circa 2015. But for some reason I have not seen it remarked upon that Ramirez chose to name both of his first two sons Manny, Jr.

A running joke in Boston has it that none of Ramirez's coaches know when he gets to the ballpark in the morning, because he's always there (if sometimes napping) when they arrive. His punctuality does not extend into the off-season, however, the length of which varies depending on whether you ask the team or Ramirez. Few people affiliated with the Red Sox have a good idea about where he might be or what he's up to in the winter months, other than that he tends to visit the Dominican Republic for about a week and always stays in shape. This year, it turned out, he had a 1967 Lincoln Continental convertible he wanted to sell.

"Manny Ramirez, you know, good guy," Jay Silberman, one of the promoters of the Atlantic City Classic Cars Auction, said on the last weekend in February, while sitting in a makeshift office in the convention center on Miss America Way. "But Manny is a space ranger—flies by the seat of his own pants. When he called, I said, 'Manny, is it my imagination or isn't it spring-training time?' " The Red Sox had asked pitchers and catchers to report to the team training facility, in Fort Myers, on February 16th, with infielders and outfielders to follow on the 20th, but Ramirez, who had attended the car show once before, merely to browse, evidently thought it might be nice to be there on the auction stand in person. "He said, 'Oh, yeah,'" Silberman went on. "He said, 'No, I'll just fly in, go back. I'll get a private jet, come in, and leave.' But, apparently, what I didn't know was that he told the Red Sox that someone was ill."

That someone was Ramirez's mother, Onelcida, who is sixty, and with whom Ramirez remains extremely close. (He attributed a rare batting slump in 2005

PHILIP BURKE

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to her health, saying, "My mom's been real sick. I've been thinking a lot about that.") Ramirez told this not to the Red Sox front office—which spent the winter trying, at his request, to trade him—but to the pitcher Julian Tavarez, about a week before the car show, in the course of explaining, by the bye, that he wouldn't be joining the squad until March 1st. Tavarez, who was already in Fort Myers, mentioned it to a newscaster, and thus in a roundabout way the team's manager, Terry Francona, came to understand that he'd be starting the Grapefruit League season without his cleanup batter. (Francona is not without a sense of humor—he said on ESPN, "If Manny has to urinate in the scoreboard every once in a while, we can live with that"—and he now refers to Tavarez as Ramirez's publicist.) Then came word of radio commercials up north that were promising Ramirez's personal appearance at a classic-cars event in Atlantic City ("TAKING SOX FOR A RIDE?" asked the *Herald*), and the Red Sox were put in the position of needing to confirm that their enigmatic star would be staying home with Mom.

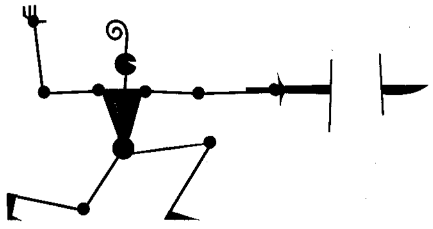
Ramirez has bailed on commitments before. Near the end of his stint with the Cleveland Indians, in 2000, team officials stopped asking him to make public appearances altogether, since he predictably failed to turn up. ("I would have to stand around the clubhouse and wait, to make sure he didn't duck out on me," Abraham Allende, the team's former director of community relations, says.) He was the M.V.P. of the 2004 World Series, which Boston won for the first time in eighty-six years, yet he neglected to accompany the team to Washington for the customary Presidential handshake.

I went to Atlantic City, just in case. The auction, billed as "America's largest indoor collectible car event," occupied twenty acres of floor space, or a little more than twice the area of Fenway Park, with a grandstand at one end and beer and popcorn venders lining the perimeter. In addition to the usual 'Cudas and Studebakers and DeVilles, the offerings included a limousine belonging to Donald Trump and the Hall of Famer Reggie Jackson's 1987 Buick Grand National, with "Reggie 44" plates. (Reggie himself was on the premises, meeting and greeting.) A small crowd had gathered around a pin-striped Rolls-Royce signed by a hundred and fifty current and former New York Yankees. Vinny Caraccio, the Rolls owner, had brought "Red Sox Suck" and "Yankees Suck" T-shirts with him, in anticipation of Ramirez's appearance. "I was dying for him to come here," he said. "I wanted to take pictures with Manny—drape the shirts in front of us. I was going to ask him to drive it up. I hear he's a character."

Ramirez's Lincoln—enormous, flat like a boat, painted Neptune blue and upholstered in ostrich—was parked directly across from the Rolls, unattended. "It's received so many compliments," Silberman, the promoter, said. "You might not even like that kind of car, but you can still admire what he did to it. He totally customized it. He's got TVs in it. He's got a computer in it. It's just a tricked-out car."

Ramirez paid ten thousand dollars for the Lincoln and, in 2004, took it to the shop of a hot-rod specialist whom he'd seen on the Discovery Channel. "This is a car you're going to keep for the rest of your life—you're not going to sell it," he said at the time, adding that he intended to give the car to his father, Aristides, who is now sixty-nine, as a birthday gift. Now Ramirez was hoping to get two hundred thousand for it, and selling duty, in his absence, fell to a New Jersey-based Cadillac dealer named Tony Averso, who wore a Red Sox cap, a yellow oxford shirt, and jeans, and sucked on an unlit cigar.

Bidding on the car began—fierce at first, and then tapering off to a final offer of a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, considerably short of Ramirez's goal. No sale. Averso took a seat at his dealership's booth, in the corner, and, despite the no-show, in effect wondered why the Red Sox and their fans find Ramirez so elusive. "This guy calls me up at least five times a week just to say hello," he said. "He calls me up for Thanksgiving. Knows my wife's Jewish—he called her up for Hanukkah. Around Christmas, I said, 'You gain any weight?' He says, 'Yeah, a few pounds. Why don't you come and run with me?' He wants me to go down to his mother's house and eat dinner when I go down to Florida. I mean, that's the kind of guy he is. Manny would love just to come here and sit. He'd hang out with my group."



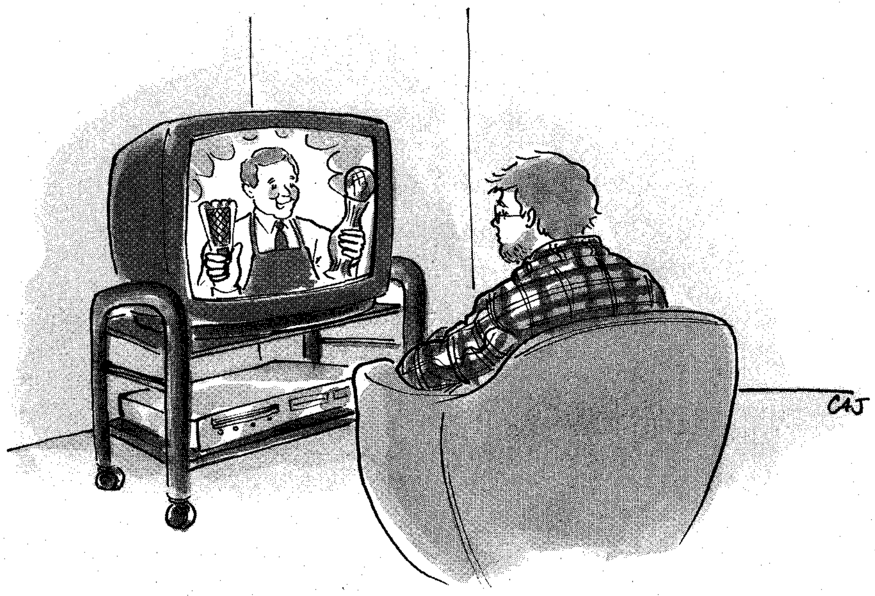
"They say, 'Manny being Manny,' but we used to say, 'That's Manny,'" Steve Mandl, the baseball coach at George Washington High School, on Audubon Avenue at 193rd Street, said recently, as he stood sentry by the locker-room door before a midmorning gym class. "It wasn't crazy stuff—it's just that he didn't really care about anything other than playing. Even team pictures—it wasn't important to him. You had to drag him by the hair. But if you said we had a game at three o'clock he'd, like, want to sit out there at seven o'clock in the morning, waiting." Mandl has been coaching at George Washington for twenty-four years, and his team has won its division title in each of the past twenty-three. While he talked, a properly officious-looking school administrator with a mustache accosted one of the current George Washington players in the hall and shouted threats about the consequences of cutting class. Mandl rolled his eyes; he was familiar with such displays. Ramirez was suspended periodically as a freshman for truancy, and did not graduate, although he attended enough classes to get through three seasons of varsity baseball as a center fielder and third baseman. (He later got his G.E.D.) His picture hangs only in Coach Mandl's office, but he is at least as good a model of success as the alumni—Harry Belafonte, Alan Greenspan, Henry Kissinger—whose framed portraits grace the entrance hall.

Onelcida Ramirez worked as a seamstress in a dress factory; Aristides drove a livery cab and fixed electronics. Manny and his three older sisters, Rosa, Evelyn, and Clara, lived in a sixth-floor walkup on 168th Street. They had no telephone. The neighborhood at the time was one of the city's worst—only East New York, in Brooklyn, had more homicides in 1990. Every morning at five-thirty, Manny left the apartment to run up Snake Hill, behind the high school, with a rope tied around his waist attached to a spare tire that dragged on the pavement behind him. "He was the hardest worker I ever had," Mandl said.

The baseball field at George Washington is oddly shaped, long in left and center fields, and short—about two hundred and eighty feet—in right, which is constrained by the downward slope of the Harlem River Valley. For Ramirez, who already displayed instinctive patience at the plate, this provided an added incentive to wait on pitches, see them longer, and drive them the opposite way, a rare habit among pros, let alone teenagers. In his final year, the Hitman, as he came to be called, batted .643.

Ramirez was extremely shy, and never asked his family to come watch him play. His first year away from home, in the minors, he borrowed a phone card belonging to Mel Zitter, who had coached him in the summer and on weekends in Brooklyn's Prospect Park, and ran up an eight-hundred-dollar tab in a month. (Now, as a millionaire, he worries about the cost of talking on the phone for longer than a minute at a time.) He didn't fully grasp that he had a future as a professional baseball player until 1993, when he reached class AA, in Canton, Ohio. That year, he also met his future publicist Tavarez, a fellow-Dominican who, as it happened, shared his love for the internal-combustion engine. As big-league rookies, they asked the newspaper reporter Sheldon Ocker if they could borrow sixty thousand dollars. "We were in Kansas City," Ocker recalls. "I reached into my pocket, and I'm, like, 'I don't have that much.' Manny says, 'How about thirty thousand?' Each of them wanted to buy a Harley." Abraham Allende, who at the time went by the Anglicized name Allen Davis, was put in charge of tutoring the two pals in English. Tavarez became a dedicated student; Ramirez played hooky. Allende referred to them as his good son and his bad son. They referred to each other as Rambo. For years afterward, Ramirez raided his teammates' lockers, borrowing their bats and clothes—even their underwear—for luck. The baggy-uniform look, now popular across the league, can be traced to his swiping the pants of Dan Williams, a bullpen catcher in Cleveland, who outweighed him by at least fifty pounds.

Once it was clear that he'd finally made it, the entire Ramirez family moved with Manny to a suburb of Cleveland, and eventually to Florida, and stopped returning to Washington Heights. "We'd like him to help the program out, which he doesn't, unfortunately," Mandl said. "The kids, every day, it's 'Why doesn't Manny do this? Why doesn't Manny do that?' We'd like to put lights on the field."



"It's 4 A.M.—maybe you'd sleep better if you bought some crap!"

In the winter of 2000, Ramirez became eligible to file for free agency, and his agent at the time, Jeff Moorad, allowed cameras to film the negotiation process. The video, which aired on ESPN that December, shows Moorad fielding inquiries from the Indians, the Yankees, and the Mariners, before the Red Sox enter the picture. "I'm one of those guys that don't talk a lot," Ramirez warns Boston's general manager, Dan Duquette. "I just go and try to play the game." Toward the end, with Boston emerging as the front-runner, Moorad adds an unusual request. "I want you to think on the way up about how you would add to your clubhouse payroll a new clubby, who would be coming over from Cleveland," he tells Duquette.

The clubby's name was Frank Mancini. He mixed Ramirez's protein shakes, advised him to eat sushi, and, most important, set the pitching machine so that it would issue sliders, low and away—a routine he picked up from the Indians' slugger Albert Belle, who believed that these were the toughest of all pitches to hit. Ramirez spent as much as a half hour every day hitting nothing but hard sliders on the rail, attempting to drive them to the opposite field, and came to see Mancini as yet another kind of lucky charm. The Red Sox, in the end, were willing to oblige his unusual request, but Lucky Charm declined the offer ("Manny, I love you like a brother, but I can't do that"), preferring to stay at home with his family. Mancini cautioned Ramirez, "Boston is a lot harder place to play than Cleveland," but Ramirez signed with the Sox: eight years for a hundred and sixty million dollars, the second-largest contract, after Alex Rodriguez's, in baseball history. During his inaugural appearance in Boston, Ramirez draped his arm around a Red Sox clubhouse attendant. "You and me are going to be friends," he said.

Duquette had been following Ramirez's career since high school, but he now concedes that he had no idea "exactly *how* unique" his new left fielder was. "When Manny first came to the Red Sox, he would stand in the batter's box, and the umpire would call ball four, and he would get back in the batter's box," Duquette, who is now the president of the fledgling Israel Baseball League, told me. "He did this in his first series at Fenway Park and again on his first road trip." After the third such incident, Duquette ventured down into the locker room. "I said, 'Manny, let me ask you something. I was just wondering why you get back in the batter's box after ball four.' He said, 'I don't keep track of the balls.' He said, 'I don't keep track of the strikes, either, until I got two.' Then he said, 'Duke, I'm up there looking for a pitch I can hit. If I don't get it, I wait for the umpire to tell me to go to first. Isn't that what you're paying me to do?'"

Duquette was fired after Ramirez's first season in Boston, when a new ownership group took over the club. Bill James, a senior adviser who was brought in by the new regime, conducted a couple of studies to try to measure, among other things, the effect of Ramirez's quirks—his tendency to glare at badly hit balls without running to first, his sporadic inability in the field to follow the arc of a fly ball. In 2003, James identified fifty-three instances in which Red Sox players had demonstrated a game-altering failure to hustle; twenty-nine of them involved Ramirez. He also concluded that Ramirez was the team's second-sloppiest fielder. (A *Times* column last month underscored this point, quoting an analyst who said, "Manny is at the far end of the as-bad-as-you-can-get-in-the-field spectrum.") In theory, playing defense and hustling are also things that he is paid to do, and in the fall of 2003 the new management, convinced that Ramirez's twenty-million-dollar salary was an albatross, placed their best hitter on irrevocable waivers, asking nothing in return for any team's willingness simply to take him (and his contract) off their hands.

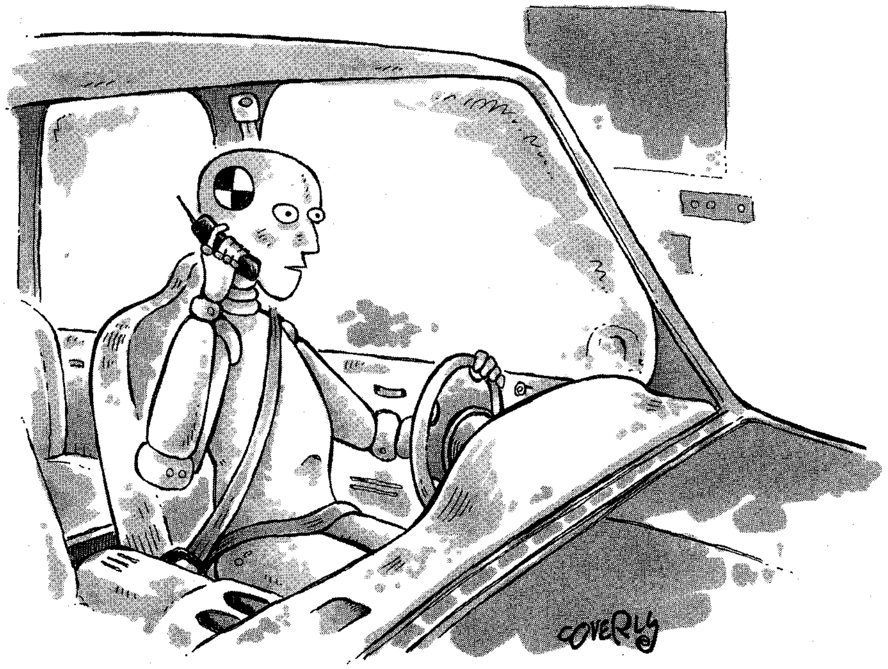
There were no takers, and the next spring, according to the writer Seth Mnookin, Ramirez let the Sox ownership know that he felt angry and insulted. Thus began the semiannual "rite of passage," as the Sox C.E.O., Larry Lucchino, calls it, in which Ramirez pleads to be shipped out of Boston—a city where, as his former teammate Johnny Damon once said, "Manny could be Mayor."

The local obsession with the Red Sox is such that David Wells, the former Yankee and Red Sox pitcher, and a night owl, likes to call Boston Picturetown, rather than Beantown, because of all the fans with cell-phone cameras in restaurants and bars, ready for deployment like civilian paparazzi. (One well-travelled series of candid shots, posted on the Web, shows a smiling Ramirez wearing a boater and a football jersey, first at a bar and then, evidently having been talked into visiting a collegiate apartment, dancing with young women, one in her pajamas.) In a famous incident in August of 2003, Ramirez called in sick during a big series against the Yankees, only to be accused by someone at the Ritz-Carlton of having a post-game cocktail with the Yankees' Enrique Wilson, another Santo Domingo native. Ramirez, who was publicly excoriated and even benched for this affront, *lives* in the Ritz, with his wife, Juliana, a Brazilian whom he met at a gym in 2001, and their two sons, Manny, Jr., who is four, and Lucas, who is one. (The other Manny, Jr., who is eleven, lives in Florida with his mother.) His defenders maintain that the Wilson visit was social but not libational.

The Red Sox management believe that Ramirez does not dislike Boston per se. "If he was really upset about it, he wouldn't live in the Ritz-Carlton, in the middle of the city," one executive told me. Since his arrival in town, Ramirez has expressed interest, at one time or another, in playing for more than a dozen different teams, including the Yankees and the Mets. According to a Sox official, he even once requested a trade to Pawtucket, the team's AAA affiliate in Rhode Island—a transaction that the chamber of commerce in that city of seventy-three thousand would no doubt welcome. Lately, he has favored Anaheim and Seattle as alternatives, though for several years he told friends that he regretted leaving the relatively anonymous comfort of Cleveland and wished he could return.

Ray Negron, a special adviser to George Steinbrenner who previously worked in Cleveland as a mentor to the team's Hispanic players, is familiar with Ramirez's moods and vulnerability. "I remember one time he was hurt and feeling sorry for himself," Negron said. "And I knew I was going to be in the car with him for half an hour, so I made him listen to Frank Sinatra's rendition of 'That's Life'—did you ever hear the words?—and he caught it. He understood what I was trying to say to him." Ramirez, ordinarily a hip-hop man, walked around humming Sinatra for days.

Clinical explanations for Ramirez's unpredictable behavior vary. Steve Mandl once suggested that Ramirez suffers from attention-deficit disorder—a diagnosis that Dan Duquette disputes, arguing that he "did a lot of due diligence" before signing Ramirez, and that, if anything, Ramirez's approach to batting suggested an essential undistractibility. Popular diagnoses



"Well, I'd better go now. I'm almost at the wall."

TO MY SOUL

Will I miss you
uncanny other
in the next life?

And you & I, my other, leave
the body, not leave the earth?

And you, a child in a field,
and I, a child on a train, go by, go by,

And what we had
give way like coffee grains
brushed across paper . . .

—*Jean Valentine*

abound—"If we didn't have Manny to talk about, who would we talk about?" Duquette says—and tend toward the faintly condescending, clichés about Ramirez as man-child ("He's *great* with kids") or idiot savant or holy fool.

Negron, for one, thinks Ramirez is misunderstood in Boston. He compared him with Joe DiMaggio. "Manny's more emotionally reachable than Joe was, O.K.?" he said. "They should be fair about this. I got to know Joe DiMaggio, and I was very close to Billy Martin, who knew *everything* about Joe DiMaggio. You know the difference? Manny's probably a better hitter." He went on, "I came up with the craziness of the Yankees in the seventies—the 'Bronx Zoo,' and Sparky Lyle and all of them sitting on cakes without clothes on. Manny was mild compared to what I had been used to." In Cleveland, I pointed out, Ramirez used to walk into the video room naked to study tapes of pitchers. "Do you understand why I would see that as normal?" Negron said. "He wasn't sitting on a birthday cake."

I got a tip from an informant that Ramirez was going to be in Fort Myers earlier—or, rather, less late—than planned, on Monday, February 26th, so I wrote the Red Sox to request a press credential. When John Blake, the director of media relations, informed me that I'd be wasting my time—that Ramirez wasn't expected until Thursday, March 1st—I made the mistake of mentioning that I'd been led to believe otherwise. Fifteen minutes later, I got an angry call from the informant, who said I'd blown my shot at an interview by leaking the news of Ramirez's surprise appearance.

Ramirez, unlike many superstars, has traditionally been affectionate, even playful, with reporters—hugging, tickling, piggybacking. "I remember one time, in the clubhouse in Cleveland, somebody jumped on my back like I'm supposed to carry him," the *Beacon Journal's* Sheldon Ocker said. "And it was Manny. I have no idea why he did that. When he got off, he just smiled." In his early years in Boston, when he'd gone a while without hitting a home run, Ramirez would sometimes squeeze the biceps of passing beat writers and say, "Got no pop!" But he has never expressed much interest in actually conversing with the press, and in recent years, as relations between Ramirez and his employers cooled to their current state of détente, he has taken to ignoring the media outright, giving them what the *Globe* columnist Dan Shaughnessy calls the "Patrick Swayze-in-'Ghost' treatment, like you're not there." Last year, Ramirez answered questions for only seven minutes on the morning of his arrival in Fort Myers, and then called it a season. ("I'm here," he said. "I get paid to play baseball. That's why I'm here. That's it. What else can I say?") In August, during what many who follow the team now refer to as "the shutdown," when Ramirez pulled himself from the lineup for twenty-eight of the final thirty-six games with a knee injury that teammates and front-office executives alike have privately questioned, Shaughnessy approached him for comment, and asked him questions for fifteen or twenty seconds, with no response. "He was in the bat rack going through some lumber, and he turned on his heels—he sort of wheeled around—and he kind of patted me on the back and took off smiling."

My tipster, in any event, was right. On the Monday following the car show, Ramirez showed up in camp, sporting red streaks in his dreads (last spring, they were orange) and a beard on his chin, and he proceeded directly to work—to the batting cage—letting his agents handle the questions.

Q: Why is Manny here today?

A: He was ready to report, and he's excited to be here. . . .

Q: Manny is thirty-four now. Do you think it's time for him to be more accountable, instead of being babied like a twelve-year-old?

A: Well, I wouldn't accept your characterization of his behavior. . . . He's happy to be here. He's here before he's required to be here.

Q: Do you think, since he's your meal ticket, you should try to help him grow up?

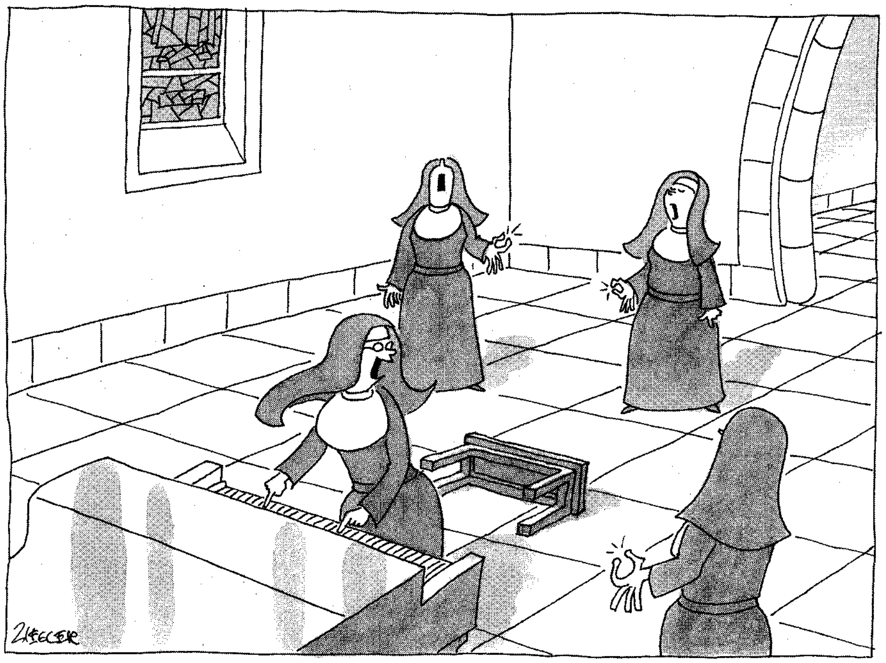
A: Again, I wouldn't agree with your characterization. . . .

Q: What has changed since he asked to be traded last fall?

A: He's here right now, and he's excited to be here.

Inside the cage, hitting soft tosses from his new clubhouse sidekick, Ino Guerrero, Ramirez betrayed no awareness of the surrounding frenzy. He began each swing almost daintily, laying his bat down against the outside edge of the plate, using his left, or bottom, hand, to mark his territory before assuming the ready stance—wide, upright, half cocked—that instills fear in so many pitchers.

Later, Terry Francona sat by a fence in front of the clubhouse, chatting with the press. He'd recently returned from a meeting with league officials, where a new set of rules had been introduced, intended to speed up the game—for instance, forbidding managers from leaving the dugout to protest umpires' warnings. "I don't particularly agree with these rules," Francona said, jabbing a fungo bat into the ground. "I'll follow 'em, because we have bosses, but . . ." His



KICKING OUT THE JAMS ON A FRIDAY NIGHT WITH THE SISTERS OF DOO-WOP

voice was drowned out by the adoring shouts of fans ("Manny! Manny!") as the team's most notorious rule breaker jogged back toward the clubhouse to shower.

"It's just impossible to insult the fans if you're that good," Shaughnessy, a frequent Ramirez critic, said later. "It's the equivalent of the beautiful woman who's loved by all the guys regardless of anything else she may contribute." (Shaughnessy's son, a freshman on the Boston College baseball team, wore Ramirez's No. 24 throughout high school, in homage.)

After a few days in Fort Myers, I began to sympathize with Ramirez's sense of baseball as a game to be played rather than analyzed, and also to suspect that it was not so much quaintness as shrewdness that explained his tunnel vision. During the off-season, the Sox had paid fifty-one million dollars merely to win the right to negotiate a contract with the Japanese pitching star Daisuke Matsuzaka, or Dice-K, as he is commonly known. (The contract itself ended up costing fifty-two million more, for six years' service.) Matsuzaka's arrival brought more than a hundred members of the Japanese press corps to Florida, and his every move—what he ate for lunch, whether or not he put ice on his arm—was scrutinized for daily news reports and video segments back home. Local real-estate agents canvassed the press box, dispensing condominium brochures stapled to free bags of snow-pea crisps.

In Japanese baseball, the most highly prized virtue is *doryoku*, or unflagging effort, and Ramirez's stubborn standoffishness, at least in the early days, seemed a direct clash with the polite forbearance of Matsuzaka. Without much chance to see Ramirez's prowess at the plate in live action, and in the absence of any of his signature comic moments (give him time), the foreigners were left with a primarily negative impression. "I just know he's kind of selfish," Naofumi Murakami, a writer for the *Asahi Shimbun*, said of Ramirez, on the afternoon of his first start, against Toronto. "He doesn't speak a lot, and the people are afraid of him." Then he added, "I just talked to Matsuzaka. He said Ramirez is very kind to Matsuzaka. They spoke Spanish, and he said hello."

Buried but hardly forgotten in the Fort were stories involving Terry Francona's decision to quit dipping ("Spit Tobacco Abstinence & Recovery War Begins Tonight," said an official Red Sox press release) and the launch of Curt Schilling's blog. Schilling, the team's Opening Day starter, somehow managed to post more words in an evening, after practice, than many beat writers produce in a week, and he even scooped the scribes on the biggest recurring story of the spring—the question of who would fill the bullpen closer's role (answer: Jonathan Papelbon). Although he never mentioned Ramirez by name, Schilling, one of the few players who has never seemed to find amusement in the Tao of Manny, did write, "I talk to the media because part of what I do, win or lose, is stand at my locker and answer questions about the game. I was taught that was part of the job when you are in the big leagues."

Ramirez, for his part, distributed T-shirts with the words "Manny being Manny" on the back, along with his career statistics. During a game against the Mets in Port St. Lucie, he was heckled after trotting to first base prematurely, on what he thought was ball four; and in the third week of March, just as things were beginning to drag, he was responsible for the introduction of some welcome levity, when the clubhouse television, tuned to "Pardon the Interruption," showed that an industrial-sized Jenn-Air barbecue, apparently belonging to Ramirez, had turned up on eBay. "Hi, I'm Manny Ramirez," the product description said. "I bought this AMAZING grill for about $4000. . . . But I never have the time to use it because I am always on the road." The Web posting was accompanied by pictures of a smiling Ramirez standing in a garage with the grill by his side, in a T-shirt and shorts and bare feet.

His teammates teased him about it. "I'm a businessman," Ramirez replied. This wasn't sufficient explanation for the journalists, and as the eBay mystery gained momentum—it elicited an editorial from the *Globe*—Ramirez even felt compelled to converse with the press, breaking his silence of three hundred and eighty-four days. He told the *Globe's* Amalie Benjamin that it was his neighbor's grill, and the *Herald's* Karen Guregian that it was his own ("I need the money"), before gently deflecting most baseball-related questions. "Why do people want to know what I think?" he asked Guregian. "I like to play the game. I don't like to give opinions."

The grill auction lent a nice merchandising symmetry to the spring season, which had, of course, begun with the car auction. (Next month, courtesy of Long-ball Vineyards: Manny Being Merlot, available from your local New England vintner.) And it provided ample fodder for the chatterboxes on WEEI, Boston's sports-talk radio, who tallied incoming bids like election returns deep into the night, from forty-eight hundred to seventy thousand to two hundred and ninety-five thousand to—this could no longer be serious—fifty million, or the amount of Matsuzaka's contract.

EBay eventually cancelled the auction, which maxed out at $99,999,999, citing irregularities, but the next afternoon, during batting practice, Ramirez told Maureen Mullen, from MLB.com, that "the grill people" had been in touch with his agent about the possibility of doing a commercial. Television cameras later caught Ramirez goofing around in the dugout with teammates, practicing a new handshake that incorporated a burger-flipping gesture.

Ramirez, for all his antics, is feeling the effects of age, and this past winter, for the first time in his career, he swung a bat to get ready for the upcoming season. Beginning December 1st, he trained almost every day at a facility called Perfect Competition, outside Fort Lauderdale. For two months, he worked exclusively on hitting the ball to the right side, but he has decided to abandon his years-long attempt to master the outside rail—the old Frank Mancini special—and concede those rare pitchers' pitches rather than try to drive them the other way. "Getting old," he remarked in the final week of spring training. "I don't mess around with it no more." That's an exclusive, because the scribe he said it to was me.

Karen Guregian, the *Herald* reporter who spoke with Ramirez about his grill, likened her experience to being granted a papal audience. On this day, when I managed to hold Ramirez's ear for more than nine minutes in the clubhouse, the shortstop Julio Lugo consecrated the occasion by showering us both with talcum powder, before turning the bottle loose inside his pants.

Ramirez's dreads were bundled up in a translucent red hairnet, like a Rastafarian *kippah*, through which I could see that he is starting to go gray. He has always said that he lives in the present, not the past, but he seemed nonetheless to be thinking more about history. "I like to travel, man," he said. "I been to Europe—you know, Spain. Dominican, Aruba, Costa Rica. Just to learn about different cultures. You know where I want to go? I want to go to China. I want to go and see—it's a city that I don't know how to say the name. It's the Prohibit City?" He meant the Forbidden City, in Beijing. "I saw it on the History Channel. They do a lot of tours over there." He said he'd been reading books in Spanish about the Dominican Republic ("so I know more about my country"), where he thinks he'll probably move when he retires. In the Dominican Republic, Julian Tavarez told me, Ramirez is "like a god," and, unlike here, no one cares about "what's going on with his life and all that."

On that sore subject, he seemed at peace in Boston for the time being ("I don't think it's hard to play there, man. I think *you* make it harder"), but he also wasn't sure where or when, exactly, he'd finish his career. "Hey, I don't know," he said. "Baseball, you know, one day you're here, the next day you're in another place. So you really cannot say, 'Oh, I'm going to be here for a long time.' "

We talked a little about cars. "I'm looking for a '62 or a '63 Lincoln convertible, because the one that I have now is a '67, and the '67 is too long," Ramirez said, adding that he was planning to try to sell it again in a month. "If I could find a '63, it would be nice, because, you know, that's the historical Kennedy car. I've been looking for one for seven months already. I can't find nothing. Everybody seems to like, you know, classic cars. Sometimes you just want to go and have one."

His mom had had a stroke, he said, but she was doing much better. "What happened to her was that they found, like, a lot of bad blood behind her stomach. So now they're giving her some pills so they could thin the blood." And he confirmed, with some regret, that he hadn't been back to his old neighborhood in Manhattan in a long time, even though he travelled to New York three or four times a year to play the Yankees. "For me it's hard, because I'm just focussed, you know, on having good years," he said. "And after the game I like to go to my hotel. I'm not twenty-five years old anymore. I'm not a boy. I take my time and get to bed." ♦

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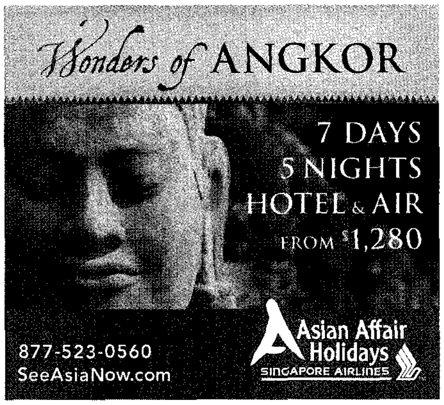
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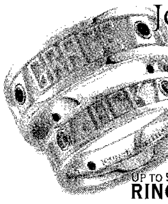
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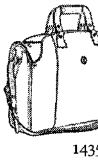
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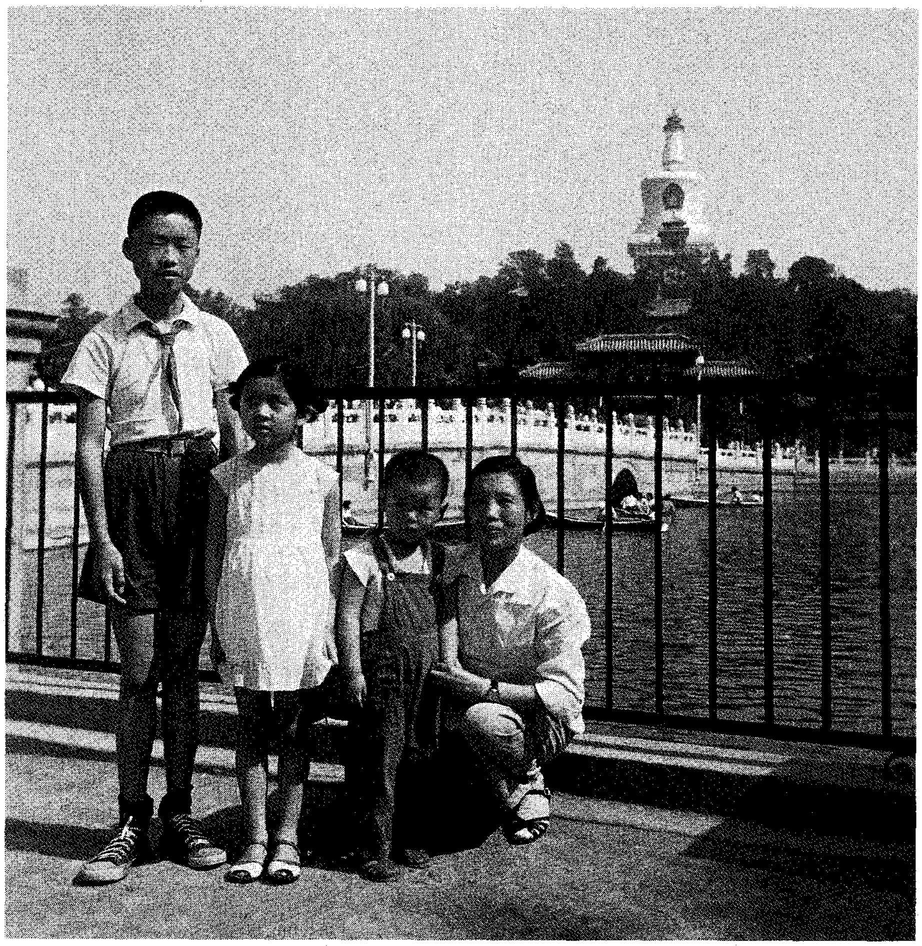
LETTER FROM BEIJING

ENEMY OF THE STATE

The complicated life of an idealist.

BY JIANYING ZHA



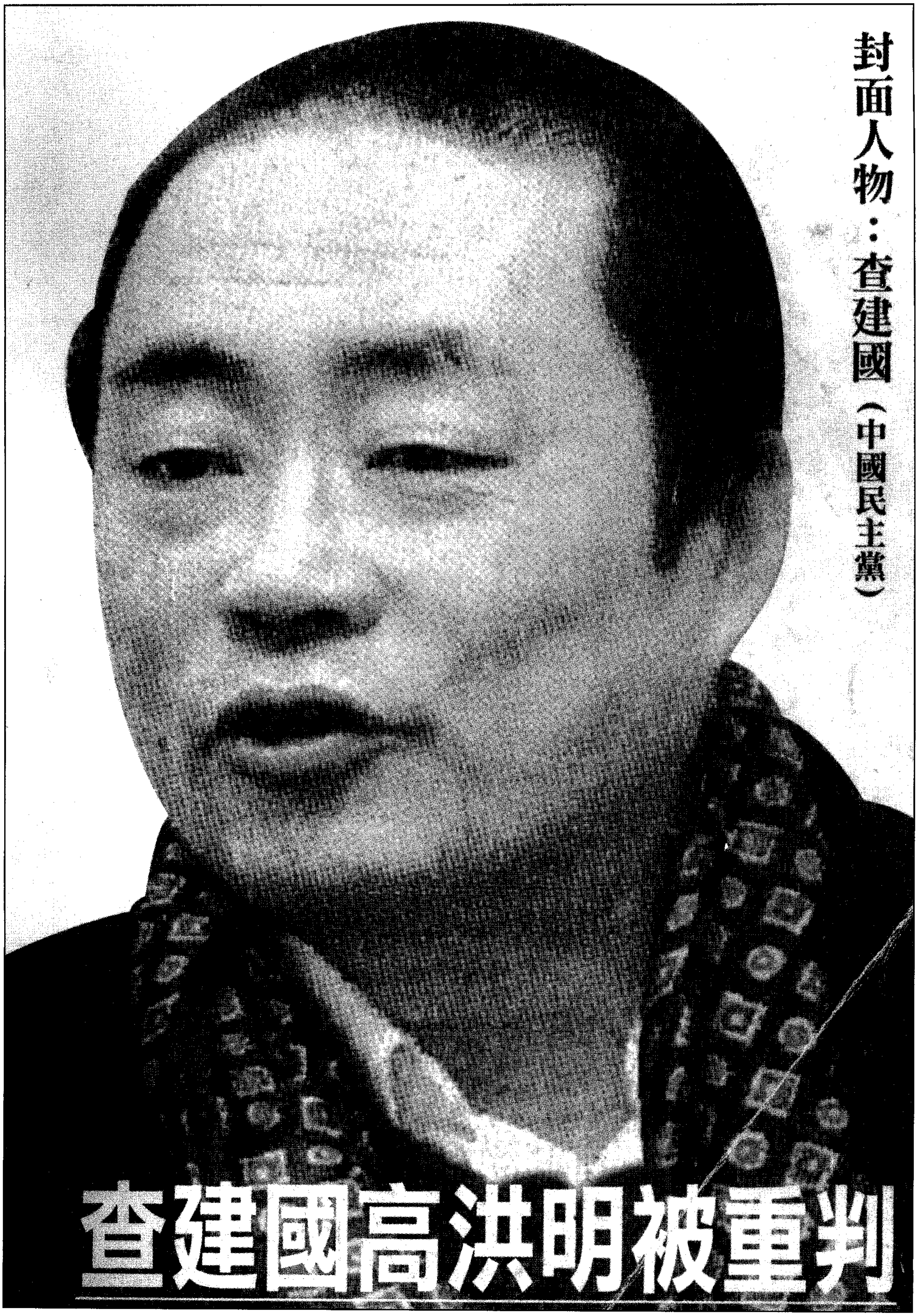
Beijing Second Prison is on the outskirts of the city for which it is named, and you can drive past the drab compound without ever noticing it. It's set about a tenth of a mile off the highway, and when I visit I usually have to tell the cabdriver about the exit on the left, because it's easy to miss. The first thing you see, after the turnoff, is a heavy, dun-colored metal gate framed by a white tiled arch, and then the guards standing in front with long-barrelled automatic weapons. Electrified wires are stretched taut along the top of the outer wall; it's a maximum-security facility. Inside the waiting room, adjoining the gate, I stow my purse and cell phone in a locker, present my documents, and wait to be called. The guards recognize me but maintain a professional remoteness. I'm visiting my brother, Zha Jianguo, a democracy activist serving a nine-year sentence for "subverting the state."

Jianguo was arrested and tried in the summer of 1999, and I remember with perfect clarity the moment I learned what had happened. I was standing in the kitchen of a friend's country house, outside Montreal, drinking a cup of freshly made coffee, and glancing at a story on the front page of the local newspaper. It was about a missile that China had just test-launched, which was supposed to be able to hit Alaska; in the last paragraph, Jianguo's trial was reported. I was astonished and outraged, and, as his little sister, I was fiercely proud as well: Jianguo's act of subversion was to have helped start an opposition party, the China Democracy Party (C.D.P.). It was the first time in the history of the People's Republic of China that anyone had dared to form and register an independent party. Jianguo and his fellow-activists had done so openly, peacefully. Now they were going to prison for it.

My first visits, seven years ago, were particularly arduous. I had to obtain spe-

COURTESY JIANYING ZHA; COURTESY XU WENLI

Above, Jianguo (age thirteen), with Jianying (age five), a younger brother, Jianming, and their mother. Opposite, Jianguo on a Hong Kong magazine cover from 1999: "Zha Jianguo and Gao Hongming"—a fellow-organizer—"are sentenced heavily."


封面人物：查建國（中國民主黨）
查建國高洪明被重判

cial permits each time, and during our thirty-minute meetings Jianguo and I were flanked by two or three guards, including an officer in charge of "special" prisoners. I was shocked by how changed Jianguo was from when I'd last seen him, two years earlier. It wasn't just his prisoner's crewcut and uniform of coarse cotton, vertical white stripes on gray; his eyes were rheumy and infected, his hands and face were swollen, and his fingernails were purple, evidently from poor circulation and nutrition. We sat on opposite sides of a thick Plexiglas panel and spoke through handsets—they were an incongruous Day-Glo yellow, like a toy phone you'd give a child. Our exchanges, in those days, seemed fraught with urgency and significance. After the first few visits, I also met with the warden, who turned out to be a surprisingly cordial young man. ("You expected a green-faced, long-toothed monster, didn't you?" he said to me, smiling.) We discussed various issues regarding Jianguo's health. Within weeks, he granted my two main requests. Jianguo was taken out of the prison in a van with armed guards to a good city hospital, where he received a medical checkup, and he was moved from a noisy cell with eleven murderers to a less crowded, quieter cell.

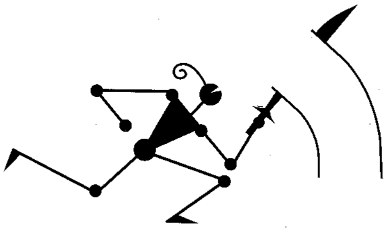
Four years ago, I moved back to Beijing, where I write for Chinese magazines and work for an academic institute; the monthly trip to Beijing Second Prison has become a routine. I try to make conversation with the officer at the "book desk," where you can leave reading material for the prisoner you're visiting; he excludes whatever he deems "inappropriate." Anything political is likely to be rejected, although a collection of essays by Václav Havel got through: the officer peered at the head shot of the gloomy foreigner, but didn't know who he was.

The so-called "interview room" is a bland, tidy space, with rows of sky-blue plastic chairs along the Plexiglas divider; you can see a well-tended garden outside, with two heart-shaped flower beds. Farther away, there's a row of buildings, gray concrete boxes, where the inmates live and work. (They're allowed outdoors twice a week, for two-hour periods of open-air exercise.) You can even see the unit captain lead the prisoners, in single file, from those buildings to the interview room.

These days, I'm just another visiting relative, and, though the phones are monitored, the guards have long ago lost interest in watching my brother and me. Time passes quickly. Jianguo and I often chat like two old friends who haven't seen each other in a while. I start by inquiring after his health and general condition, then report some news about relatives or friends. After that, we might talk about the books he's read recently or discuss something in the news, such as the war in Iraq or Beijing's preparation for the 2008 Olympics. Sometimes we even exchange carefully phrased opinions on China's political situation. Finally, I make a shopping list. Each month, a prisoner is allowed about eighty yuan in spending money (about ten dollars) and a hundred and fifty yuan of extra food if a visiting relative buys it at the prison shop; this is for security reasons, but it also provides a source of income for the prison. Jianguo often asks me to buy a box of cookies. Another prisoner, who is serving a ten-year sentence for being a "Taiwanese spy," has been teaching him English. The man's wife left him, and no one comes to visit. Apparently, he really likes the cookies.

In the first couple of years, I kept asking Jianguo whether he was ever beaten or hurt in any way. "I'm on pretty good terms with all the officers," he would tell me. "They are just following orders, but they all know why I got here, and they've never touched me. My cellmates have fights among themselves but never with me. They all kind of respect me." He told me that the jailers let it drop when he refused to answer if he was addressed as *fan ren* (or "convict") So-and-So; he objects to the title because he doesn't believe that he committed a crime. He has also refused to take part in the manual work that all prisoners in his unit are supposed to do: packing disposable chopsticks and similar chores.

A family friend told me that Jianguo might be able to leave China on medical parole, and I asked him many times if he would consider it. He wouldn't. "I will not leave China unless my freedom of return is guaranteed," he insisted. I have stopped asking. Jianguo repeatedly mentions the predicament of exiled Chinese dissidents in the West, who, in the post-Tiananmen era, have lost their political effectiveness. "Once they leave Chinese soil, their role is very limited," Jianguo says. But how politically effective is it to sit in a tiny cell for nine years—especially when most of your countrymen don't even know of your existence?



That's something I've never had the heart to bring up. The mainland Chinese press didn't report the 1999 C.D.P. roundup, so few people in China ever knew what had happened. Outside China, there was some media coverage at the time, and some protests from human-rights groups, but the incident was soon eclipsed by the Falun Gong story. After almost eight years of incarceration, Jianguo is unrepentant, resolute, and forgotten.

Jianguo is the older of two sons my father had from his first marriage. He was seven when my father divorced his mother and married mine. Although my father had custody of Jianguo, the eight years that separated us meant that my childhood memories of him are mostly dim. As was the fashion at the time, he went to a boarding school and came home only on Sundays. He remained a gangly, reticent figure hovering at the edge of our family life.

Divorce was uncommon in China at the time, and no doubt it cast a shadow on Jianguo's childhood. My mother recalls that, when Jianguo slept in the house, she sometimes heard him sobbing under his quilt. In letters written from prison, he described those weekends as "visiting someone else's home" and said that he "felt like a Lin Daiyu"—referring to the tragic heroine in the Chinese classic "The Dream of the Red Chamber," who, orphaned at a young age, has to live in her uncle's house and compete with her cousins for love and attention. But his mother, whom I call Aunt Zhong, says that Jianguo was ambitious from a very young age. When she first told him the story of Yue Fei, a legendary general of the Song dynasty who was betrayed

"How dare you—in a straitjacket, no less—psychoanalyze me."

and died tragically, Jianguo looked up at her with tears in his eyes, and said, "But I'm still too young to be a Yue Fei!" She was startled. "I didn't *expect* him to become a Yue Fei!" she told me.

She probably expected him to become a scholar. After all, the boy was surrounded not by military men but by academics and artists. My father was a philosopher. Aunt Zhong is an opera scholar and librettist from a distinguished intellectual family; her father was a university vice-president, her mother a painter who studied with the famous master Qi Baishi. In another letter from prison, Jianguo described those primary-school years as "uneventful," aside from a vivid memory he has of a great summer storm that struck while he walked back to school one Sunday afternoon. In heated language, he recalled how he fought the wind and the downpour all the way, how he was drenched, alone in the deserted streets, but, oh, the awesome beauty of the thunder and lightning and the ecstasy he felt when he finally reached the school gate, the feeling he had of having beaten the monstrous storm all by himself!

Jianguo was also a voracious reader and a brilliant Go player. At the age of fourteen, he was accepted to an élite boarding middle school in Beijing, receiving the top score in his class in the entrance exam. Yet he felt restless. School life was confining, and he disliked the petty authorities he had to contend with. During this period, he began to worship Mao Zedong. He read Mao's biography closely and tried to imitate his example: taking cold showers in winter, reading philosophy, and pondering the big questions of politics and society, which he debated with a group of friends. His first political act was to write a letter to the school administration attacking the rigidity of the curriculum and certain "bourgeois sentiments" it enshrined. This was something that Jianguo is still proud of: even before the Cultural Revolution, he had challenged the system, alone.

My own sheltered childhood ended with the Cultural Revolution. My parents were denounced as "stinking intellectuals" and "counter-revolutionaries." Our house was ransacked. Under the new policy, I went to a nearby school of workers' children, some of whom threw rocks at me and even left human excrement on our balcony. But Jianguo thrived amid the social turmoil, and became a leader of a Red Guard faction at his school. He seldom came home. When he did, he dressed in full Red Guard fashion: the faded green Army jacket and cap, the Mao button on the shirt pocket, the bright-red armband. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and, with his manly good looks, he seemed to me larger than life. I was shy and tongue-tied in his presence.

Two years later, in 1968, Jianguo left for Inner Mongolia with a group of other Red Guards. He was answering Chairman Mao's call for the educated city youth to transform China's poor countryside. My parents held a going-away party for him: I remember the din of a houseful of Red Guards talking, laughing, and eating, my mother boiling pot after pot of noodles, my father sitting silently in his study watching the teenagers as though in someone else's house, and Jianguo, seventeen years old, holding court like a young commander on the eve of battle. He invited his friends to take whatever they liked from my father's library; many books were "borrowed," including my mother's favorite novel, "Madame Bovary," never to be returned.

Aunt Zhong went to the railway station to see him off. When the train started leaving, she waved at her son. "But he acted as if I wasn't there," she told me. "He just kept yelling 'Goodbye, Chairman Mao!' The Cultural Revolution really poisoned his mind."

Millions of urban youngsters went to the countryside in those days, but not all of them were true believers: some felt pressure to show proper "revolutionary enthusiasm," while others went because there were no jobs in the cities. Most of them, shocked by the poverty and backwardness of rural life, became disillusioned. And as the fever of the Cultural Revolution waned, in the mid-nineteen-seventies, many returned home, getting factory jobs or going to university, which in those days depended not on your exam results but on your connections and political record.

Jianguo wasn't among them. During the seven years he spent on a farm in Inner Mongolia, he had served as the village head and was popular among peasants. He was a good farmhand. He could drink as much *baijiu*, the hard northern liquor, as the locals could. He had married a former Beijing schoolmate and Red Guard, who stayed on because of him, and they were making a life for themselves in the countryside. The villagers ignored whatever "revolutionary initiatives" Jianguo tried to introduce, but his personality—honest, warm, generous—won him their affection.

In 1976, Mao died, the Cultural Revolution ended, and Jianguo's daughter was born. Jianguo named her Jihong ("Inheriting Red"). The next few years were critical in China: Deng Xiaoping began to steer the country toward reform and greater openness. The university entrance exam, which had been suspended for more than a decade, was reinstated; I was among those who took the exam and went to university, a welcome change from the farmwork to which I'd been consigned. But Jianguo seemed stuck in the earlier era. He framed a large portrait of Mao with black gauze and hung it on a wall of his home; he would sit in front of it for hours, lost in thought. His wife later told me that Jianguo spent two years grieving for Mao.

Jianguo eventually took a job with the county government of his rural outpost, working for the local party secretary, a Mongolian named Batu, who took a shine to the bright young Beijinger. Then Jianguo criticized one of Batu's policy directives, which he saw as disastrous for the peasants, and even took Batu to task in front of a crowded cadre assembly. Jianguo lost his post and was placed under investigation. Condemned as a "running dog of the Gang of Four," he was locked up in solitary confinement, allowed to read only books by Marx, Lenin, and Mao. Two years later, Batu left the county for a higher position, and Jianguo was released. He was given various low-level posts, and was never promoted.

In 1985, when I was a graduate student in comparative literature at Columbia University, I went to visit him. After an eighteen-hour ride on a hard-seated train from Beijing, I arrived at a dusty little county station. The man waiting for me there looked like all the other local peasants hawking melons and potatoes from the back of their oxcarts. He was dressed like a peasant, spoke with a local accent, and had even developed a habit of squatting. His torpid movements suggested years of living in a remote backwater where nothing much ever happened.

It was early 1989 when Jianguo's wife finally prevailed on him to move back to Beijing. She was a practical woman, and she wasn't reconciled to a life of rural squalor. She was the one who, driven by poverty, sewed Jianguo's last piece of Red Guard memorabilia, a faded red flag bearing the guards' logo, into a quilt cover. Now she was determined not to let their daughter grow up a peasant. For Jianguo, however, their return marked a humiliating end of a twenty-year mission. The idea of bringing revolution to the countryside had turned out to be a fantasy. He changed nothing there. It changed him.

Four months after Jianguo's return to Beijing, students started marching on Tiananmen Square. Going to the square each day, listening to the speeches and the songs, watching a new generation of student rebels in action—for Jianguo, it was a profoundly moving experience. Twenty years earlier, the Red Guards' god was Mao. Now the idealistic kids in blue jeans and T-shirts had erected a new statue: the Goddess of Democracy.

I was living in Beijing at the time and visited the square daily. Jianguo said little when we met, though he was evidently in turmoil. One afternoon, I asked him to join me while I visited a friend who was active in the protests. Outside on the square, my friend greeted me warmly and invited me to come inside the tent where a group of student leaders were meeting, but when Jianguo followed me he frowned and barred him: "No, not you!" I explained that the man was my brother. My friend looked incredulous. Here, in his native city, Jianguo stood out as a country bumpkin. And, in 1989, the democracy activists were members of an urban élite. My friend's snobbery must have driven home the message to Jianguo: *Stand aside. This is not your revolution.*

Soon, it was nobody's revolution. What happened to the Tiananmen protesters on June 4th showed what awaited

HAPPY HOUR
AT THE
STAMEN & PISTIL

those who openly challenged the system. After the massacre, all government ministers were required to demonstrate loyalty to the Party by visiting the few hospitalized soldiers—"heroes in suppressing the counter-revolutionary riot." The novelist Wang Meng, who was then the Minister of Culture, got out of it by claiming ill health and checking into a hospital himself. He was promptly removed from office.

During the spring demonstrations, reporters for the *People's Daily* had held up a famous banner on the street: "We don't want to lie anymore!" It was a rare moment of collective courage. Two months later, they were forced to lie again. A journalist at the newspaper described to me how the campaign to purge dissent was conducted there: meetings were held at every section, and everybody had to attend. Each employee was required to give a day-by-day account of his activities during the Tiananmen period, and then to express his attitude toward the official verdict. "Every one of us did this—no one dared to say no," he said, recalling the scene seventeen years later. "Can you imagine how humiliating it was? We were crushed, instantly and completely."

Among journalists and intellectuals, a brief interval of exhilaration had given way to depression and fear. Many withdrew from public life and turned to private pursuits. (A few, like me, moved to the United States or Europe.) Scholars embarked on esoteric research—hence the *Guoxue Re*, the early-nineties craze for studying the Chinese classics. A friend of mine, the editor of a magazine that had been an influential forum for critical reporting, turned his attention to cuisine and classical music. Meanwhile, Jianguo, whose residual faith in the Communist Party and in Mao had perished on June 4th, was adrift, both politically and personally.

The driver of the gypsy cab was a stocky man with a rugged, weather-beaten face, and wore a cheap, oily-looking blazer. He was leaning on a Jetta, smoking a cigarette, when I got out of the prison snack shop. On this particular afternoon, three years ago, I was the last visitor to leave. As soon as he saw me, he took one hard draw on the cigarette and flicked it away.

"Good thing you're still here," I said as I got into the car, "or I'd have had a long walk to the bus stop."

"I was waiting for you," he said simply, and started the engine.

I told him my city address. "Thirty yuan," he said. I agreed, and we were on our way. At the end of the long asphalt road, the car turned right, onto a wider street, passing enormous mounds of construction material. In the distance, a line of silos was silhouetted against the horizon. Though we were just a forty-minute drive from the city, everywhere you looked there were old factories, low piles of rubble, industrial-waste dumps, half-deserted farm villages on the brink of being bulldozed and "developed." The farm I'd been sent to work on when I was in my late teens was just a few miles away.

I was in my usual post-visit mood: tired and unsociable. I closed my eyes, and drowsed until a sharp horn woke me. When I opened my eyes, there were cars everywhere: we had got off the expressway and had entered the maw of downtown traffic. We were hardly moving. It was about four o'clock, the beginning of rush hour.

"You were visiting your brother, weren't you?" the driver asked.

My eyes met the driver's in the rear-view mirror. "How did you know?"

"Oh, we know the Second Prison folks pretty well. My father used to work there. Your brother is a Democracy Party guy, right?"

"You know about them?"

"Oh, yes, they want a multiparty system. How many years did he get?"

"Nine. He's halfway through."

"Getting any sentence reduction?"

"Nope, because he doesn't admit to any crime."

The driver spat out the window. "What they did is no crime! But it's useless to sit in a prison. Is he in touch with Wuer Kaixi?"

This gave me a start. Wuer Kaixi was a charismatic student leader of Tiananmen Square, who, after years of exile in the United States, now lives in Taiwan. "No! How could he be?"

"But you know some foreigners, don't you? You should tell your brother to get out, and get together with the folks in America and Taiwan. Most important thing is: get some guns! How can you beat the Communist Party? Only by armed struggle!"

"That's an interesting idea," I said, taken aback and trying to hide it. "But then China would be in a war. It would make for bloody chaos."

"That would be great!" the driver said.

I was appalled. "If that happened, don't you worry that the biggest victims would be ordinary people?"

"The ordinary people are the biggest victims already!" the driver replied, his face mottled with fury. "You look at this city—at what kind of life the officials and the rich people have, and what kind of shitty life we have."

During the next ten minutes, while navigating traffic on Chang'an Avenue, the driver told me about himself. He had worked in the same state plant for more than twenty years, first as a machine operator, later as a truck driver. Then, a few years ago, the plant went bankrupt and shut down. All the workers were let go with only meagre severance pay.

"But they must give you partial medical insurance," I said. I was thinking about three high-school friends with whom I've stayed in touch over the years: all three women were state factory workers now in their forties, all were laid off, but all have since found new jobs, and are making more money than before. Two of them even own their homes.

"The insurance is a piece of shit!" the driver replied. "It doesn't cover anything. I'm scared of getting sick. If I'm sick, I'm done for. For twenty years we worked for them, and this is how they got rid of us!" He spat again. "You look at this city, all these fancy buildings and restaurants. All for the rich people! People like us can't afford anything!"

On both sides of Chang'an Avenue, new skyscrapers and giant billboards stood under a murky sky. When it comes to architecture and design, most of this new Beijing looks like some provincial official's dream of modernization. It's clear that there is a lot of money in Beijing and a great many people are living better than before. But the gap between the rich and the poor has widened. I wondered whether Jianguo, or someone like him, could be the kind of leader that people like this aggrieved cabdriver were waiting for. Under the banner of social justice, they could vent their rage against China's new order.

MERCURY DRESSING

To steal a glance and, anxious, see
Him slipping into transparency—
The feathered helmet already in place,
Its shadow fallen across his face
(His hooded sex its counterpart)—
Unsteadies the routines of the heart.
If I reach out and touch his wing,
What harm, what help might he then bring?

But suddenly he disappears,
As so much else has down the years . . .
Until I feel him deep inside
The emptiness, preoccupied.
His nerve electrifies the air.
His message is his being there.

—*J. D. McClatchy*

Despite the emotions that the Tiananmen massacre had awakened in Jianguo, he had a more pressing matter to deal with that year: he had to make a living. Legally, Jianguo and his wife were "black" persons: they had no residential papers, no apartment, no job. Worse still, they had no marketable skills. So for a period they stayed with relatives and took temporary jobs at an adult-education school that Jianguo's younger brother, Jianyi, had started. Jianguo worked as a janitor, his wife as a bookkeeper. The school was a success, mainly because it offered prep courses for the Test of English as a Foreign Language. During the chill that followed Tiananmen, studying English was becoming ever more popular, and TOEFL was crucial for applying to foreign schools. Jianyi was growing rich, fast. It was an awkward reversal of roles. The two brothers had very different personalities: next to his serious, ambitious, and hardworking big brother, Jianyi was always viewed as a baby-faced "hooligan": he goofed off at school, chased girls, and squandered his money on dining out and having a good time. But in the new China the free-spending playboy was thriving. At first, he'd wanted Jianguo to help him manage the business, but Jianguo declined; he preferred to have more time to read and think, and being a janitor allowed for that. "He is always interested in saving China, but he can't even save himself!" Jianyi once said to me about Jianguo. I wondered how Jianguo felt about pushing a mop around for his little brother.

Jianguo didn't stay on the job long. In the following decade, he moved frequently, from apartment to apartment, and from job to job, mainly low-level office work. But he seemed to have decided that he'd spent enough time reading and thinking; he was eager to try something bigger. After 1992, when the society was seized by an entrepreneurial fever, Jianguo tried a number of ventures. He got involved in a scheme to buy coal in the north and sell it in the south. He set up a factory producing a new licorice soda. (It tasted like cough syrup.) He ran business-training programs. But he always ended up either quitting the job or closing the shop. By the summer of 1997, the last time I saw him before he was arrested, he had filed for bankruptcy several times. His personal life was in disarray as well. He had divorced his wife of nearly twenty years and married a young, pretty girl from Inner Mongolia who worked in the soda factory. This second marriage lasted less than a year, collapsing as soon as the business did, and Jianguo ended up moving in with his daughter.

By then, Jihong ("Inheriting Red") had been renamed Huiyi ("Wisdom and Pleasure"). The girl attended a community college, and spent her time reading pulp romances and chatting with her girlfriends. But she was devoted to her father. When she graduated, in 1998, she got a job as a front-desk receptionist at the upscale Jinglun Hotel, and turned over half her salary to him. It was clear to both of them, by now, that he wasn't cut out for business. Then, in 1998, Jianyi died, of a brain tumor, and Jianguo inherited his Beijing apartment. Finally, Jianguo had a place that he could call his own. With a home, and the help of his daughter, he was free to do what he wanted.

That August, I received a long, wistful letter from Jianguo. Jianyi's death, at the age of forty-four, was obviously a shock. "He's gone, and the sense of life's bitter shortness presses on me more urgently," Jianguo wrote. "Yesterday was my forty-seventh birthday. Will my remaining twenty or thirty years also slip away in the blink of an eye?" Now he looked back on his existence:

> My whole life I have had a strong mind but my fate has not been good. Over the past few decades I have been fighting this fate, clenching my teeth and not crying. I am an idealist. For the ideal of democracy, I quit the Party; for the ideal of freedom, I quit my job, over and again; for the ideal of love, I divorced, over and again. To this day I am, intellectually, professionally, financially and emotionally, a "vagabond." . . . The Chinese market is now in a slump, and the majority of businesses are not doing well. China, too, is floating in wind and storm, not knowing where it is heading. When will there be an opportunity for people like me to rise up with the flagpole of rebellion?

Jianguo hadn't changed, I remember thinking with a vague sense of foreboding. Within the striving, clueless businessman was a rebel waiting for a new cause.

What I did not know was that Jianguo had already found it. A couple of years earlier, he had met a man named Xu Wenli, a former railway electrician and a veteran dissident from the Democracy Wall period. That was a brief political thaw in the late nineteen-seventies, when, on a wall at a busy intersection in the heart of Beijing, people put up posters, essays, poems, and mimeographed articles, attracting huge crowds who read and discussed what had been posted. (In late 1979, the government cracked down, and cleaned it up.) When a friend introduced Jianguo to Xu Wenli, he had just emerged from a dozen years in prison. The two men had passionate discussions about Chinese politics, but at first they also planned to go into business together. One idea was to start a car-rental company. They did some market surveys, and decided on their own business titles: Xu would be the chairman of the board, Jianguo the vice-chairman. In the end, the venture didn't work out; a loan that Xu was counting on never materialized.

In early 1998, the atmosphere in China was unusually relaxed—the government was negotiating for membership in the World Trade Organization; President Clinton was coming to visit—and small groups of dissidents in different cities decided to take advantage of the new mood, moving to form an opposition party. They settled on the name China Democracy Party. Xu assumed the title of the chairman of the C.D.P.'s Beijing branch, Jianguo that of the vice-chairman, the two reclaiming their business titles for a loftier cause. With peculiar daring, or naïveté, the officers of the C.D.P. decided to do everything openly: they tried to register the party at the civil-affairs bureau, they posted statements and articles on the Internet, they talked to foreign reporters. For a few months, the government allowed these activities, but, shortly after Clinton's visit, in June, a crackdown began, and a first wave of arrests and trials took place. Xu Wenli, among others, received a thirteen-year sentence. Jianguo remained free but was followed by four security agents every day. He assumed the title of the party's executive chairman and carried on: he called meetings and urged the few C.D.P. members who came to stand firm; he posted new statements on the Internet, expressing his political views and demanding the release of Xu Wenli and his other jailed comrades. When the police finally arrested Jianguo, in June of 1999, he had long been ready for them. He had even taken to carrying around a toothbrush.

"Heroic deeds are not appropriate to everyday life," the Czech dissident Ludvík Vaculík wrote, in the nineteen-seventies. "Heroism is acceptable in exceptional situations, but these must not last too long." Those words were born out by the tenor of post-Tiananmen Beijing. Over time, a semblance of normalcy returned. Throughout the nineteen-nineties, while new market reforms were launched and people's energies were directed toward the pursuit of wealth, the Party established clear guidelines about which topics could be publicly discussed and which topics could not (such as the infamous "three Ts": Tiananmen, Taiwan, and Tibet). As the economy boomed, the ranks of the educated élite splintered: some plunged into commerce, some—notably the economists and the applied scientists—built careers selling their expertise to the government and to corporations. Artists and scholars scrambled to adapt to the marketplace.

Gradually, a tacit consensus emerged, which was captured in the title of a book published in the late nineteen-nineties: "Gaobie Geming" ("Farewell, Revolution"). The book was written by two of the star intellectuals of the previous decade, Li Zehou, a philosopher and historian, and Liu Zaifu, a literary critic. Both men had been hugely influential figures during the movements that led up to Tiananmen. Both became involved with the Tiananmen demonstrations, and ended up living in the United States in the nineties. Yet their book was a scathing critique of the radicals and the revolutionaries. Looking back upon the past century of Chinese history, Li and Liu observed that attempts to bring about radical change had always resulted either in disaster or in tyranny. China was too big, its problems too numerous and complex, for any quick fix. Incremental reform, not revolution, was the right approach. In a separate article, Li also laid out four successive phases of development—economic progress, personal freedom, social justice, political democracy—that stood between China and full modernity. In other words, achieving real democracy wasn't a matter of throwing a switch.

These were the arguments of two smart, reasonable Chinese with liberal-democratic sympathies. And they struck a chord with other smart, reasonable Chinese who were equally sympathetic toward liberalism but increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of radical change. Though the book was published in Hong Kong, it gave voice to a subtle reconfiguration in the attitude of mainland élites during the nineties.

The new consensus was shaped by a curious combination of trends. Outside China, the exiled pro-democracy move-

"Oh no, not dinner again!"

"The first thing you need to do is update your résumé."

• •

ment had foundered, beset by factionalism. Inside China, the tone for public life was Deng Xiaoping's mantra "No debate"—that is, forget ideological deliberation and focus on economic development. While the technocrats moved to the politburo and pushed market reforms, the ideologues stayed in the propaganda ministry and tried to muffle voices of criticism. Meanwhile, the economy kept growing, at breakneck speed. As China integrated into the international marketplace, four hundred million Chinese were lifted out of poverty. A new affluent class began to emerge in the cities and coastal areas, where the younger generation, reared on the pop culture of consumerism, shied away from politics. As beneficiaries of the boom, they were generally "pro-China"; nationalist sentiments were growing. But "pro-democracy"? It's unclear whether these young people cared enough to give it much thought.

So when Jianguo and his comrades formed the China Democracy Party, in 1998, they not only failed to grasp the limits of the government's tolerance; they failed to take the measure of the national mood. For the most part, they lacked deep roots in any particular community; they weren't well educated or connected to the country's élites; and they had little contact with other liberals and reformers. A few, like Xu Wenli, were marginalized because of their former prison records and their continued refusal to recant or compromise. They had the courage of their convictions, and not much else. Some, like Jianguo, had tried to do something "constructive," and join the entrepreneurial ferment, but got nowhere. They had, in short, lost their way in the new era.

When I first started visiting Jianguo in jail, I could tell, despite his disavowals, how much he cared about the outside world's response to what he'd done, and to what had been done to him. So I tried to tell him every piece of "positive news" I could find. His eyes would light up, or he'd assume a look of solemn resolve. My task got harder as the C.D.P. faded from the news. In late 2002, Xu Wenli, the star dissident, was released on medical parole and was flown to the United States on Christmas Eve. Afterward, coverage of the other jailed C.D.P. members largely ceased.

Once, I had a sobering conversation with a woman while waiting for the prison interview. She was visiting her younger brother, who had killed another man in a quarrel and had been sentenced to twenty years. "He was in the restaurant business and the guy owed him money," she explained. "He was young, too rash." She asked me what my brother had done. When I told her, she was flabbergasted. "Organizing a party?" she said, and blinked as though I were speaking in tongues. "I didn't know our country still had political prisoners. I thought everyone here got in trouble because of something to do with money."

The last time I saw the C.D.P. mentioned in a major publication was in March, 2002, in a profile in the New York *Times Magazine*. The subject of the article was my friend John Kamm, a former American businessman who became a full-time campaigner for Chinese prisoners of conscience. The article dismissed the C.D.P. as "a toothless group of a few hundred members writing essays mainly for one another." The line made me wince. The C.D.P. men could take pride in their status as "subverters" of a totalitarian state. And they could forgive their countrymen for not rising up with them: they are heroic precisely because most other people are not. But how could they face this verdict—of laughable irrelevance—from the *Times*, a symbol of the freedom and democracy for which they'd sacrificed everything? Toothless men writing for one another: the words were heartless. They were also true. And perhaps it didn't much matter that these men were toothless because their powerful opponent had rendered them so; that they were writing only for each other because in China a message like theirs was not allowed to spread further. I felt like weeping. But I wasn't sure whether it was because I was sorry for Jianguo or angry at him—for being such a fool. While he sits in his tiny cell, day after day, year after year, the world has moved on.

"You can't say the world has forgotten about him," John Kamm insisted, when we spoke not long ago. "I haven't! I care about what happens to your brother!" We were drinking coffee in the lobby café of a Beijing hotel where John was staying during one of his trips to China.

John is, by his own description, "a human-rights salesman." Formerly the chairman of the American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong, he had a lucrative business career, with a chauffeured Mercedes, maids, and a condo in a prime location. Then, in the mid-nineteen-nineties, he gave all that up to become an advocate for political prisoners in China. Shuttling frequently between Beijing and

Washington, D.C., and meeting with high-ranking officials on both sides, John uses everything in his power—hard data, personal connections, cajoling, name-dropping, bargaining—to make sure that the issue of Chinese political prisoners doesn't go away.

He's a big man with a sonorous voice, earthy humor, and gregarious charm. He's also a devout Catholic with a missionary fervor, and his conversation glistens with Biblical cadences. ("Justice will flow down like a river and righteousness a mighty stream.") He has been my main adviser on all questions concerning Jianguo and my prison visits, and if Jianguo has been treated better than some political detainees it's probably because of John's efforts. But he acknowledges that Jianguo's name has fallen off the annual list of political prisoners compiled by various Western governments and watchdog groups. I once asked John what he would do if he were in Jianguo's position. John thought for a moment and told me a story about what had happened in the late nineteen-forties when Bertolt Brecht, then living in the United States, was subpoenaed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He agreed to testify, assured the committee that he had no sympathy for Communism, and was thanked for coöperating. Then he flew to Europe, and ended up in East Berlin, where he doesn't seem to have given a second thought to anything he might have professed on the stand. "If I was arrested, I'd do exactly what Brecht did," John told me. "I'd lie to save my ass. Then I'd have a life!"

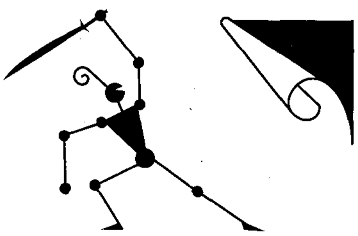
I sighed. I consider John, who abandoned his career to devote himself to the plight of strangers in someone else's country, to be an American hero. So, if even a man like him would do what was necessary to stay out of jail, why must my brother be so stubborn? Doesn't it make more sense to chip at a wall, little by little, than to bash your head against it?

The harshest comments I have heard about Jianguo come from his own mother. "It's not bravery," she once told me. "It's arrogance and stupidity. He's had a hero complex from childhood. The problem is, he's not a hero. He is a foot soldier who wants to be a general, but without the talent and the skills of a general."

Aunt Zhong was a beautiful woman when she was young. Purged as a "rightist" in 1957, she lost her job and labored in a camp for years. She is now a little white-haired woman in her seventies, with a kind smile and swollen, aching legs. She has no illusions about the Communist Party, but thinks that change can occur only slowly. In her view, the C.D.P. was "banging an egg against a rock." She had tried to talk Jianguo out of his involvement in the C.D.P., by reminding him of his responsibilities to his own family. Jianguo had replied with a classical saying: "*Zhong xiao bu neng liang quan*"—"One must choose between loyalty and filial devotion." Upset by Jianguo's obstinacy, she did not visit him for two years after his arrest.

Her exasperation is reciprocated. Aunt Zhong and I once went to visit Jianguo together. During the interview, we took turns speaking with him by phone. At one point, Aunt Zhong started talking about how China was too big a country to change quickly, how the situation was gradually improving and many things were getting better. I watched Jianguo's face darken steadily, until he said something and Aunt Zhong handed the phone to me. As soon as I got on, Jianguo said in a voice shaking with emotion, "I don't want to listen to her! She only makes me angry!"

After the visit, I told Aunt Zhong about a conversation I'd had with Han Dongfang, a workers'-union activist who had been jailed after Tiananmen. When we met, Han had been living in Hong Kong for many years, hosting a radio call-in show on Chinese labor problems. His credentials as a dissident were impeccable: during his two years in jail, he was tortured, got violently sick, and nearly died. Refusing to yield, he staged a hunger strike. Unlike many Chinese dissidents, though, Han is decidedly urbane (stylish clothes, fluent English, polite manners) and reflective about his past and his personal weaknesses. He was critical of Chinese dissidents on the whole, including himself. "Please don't get me started on that topic," Han told me. "I don't have anything nice to say about the lot." He believed that many Chinese dissidents were afflicted with an inflated self-regard. "It's a sickness so many of us are not aware of," he said. But, Han said, one should not discuss these things with a dissident in prison. "Because to get through prison you need to mobilize all your strength, to be self-righteous and believe that you are a hero," he said. "You need that kind of mental arrogance to prop up your spirit. You cannot afford self-doubt."



Aunt Zhong listened to what Han had told me, and accepted the point. She promised not to discuss politics again with Jianguo. "I just hope he will get through his term and come out in good health," she said, shaking her head. "After that, maybe we can all have a good talk with him. I hope he will change his way of thinking and not get back in jail again."

The political landscape in China has grown more complex since the days of the C.D.P. crackdown. After years of rapid growth, China is now the fourth-largest economy in the world, poised to surpass Germany and Japan before long, and widely expected to catch up with the United States around 2050. It has the highest foreign-currency reserve in the world. The transformation, however, has been accompanied by endemic corruption, environmental destruction, a widening income gap, and unravelling social services. The policies of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao have tempered some of these problems, by eliminating the agricultural tax, paying more attention to the "weaker communities," and taking measures to curb graft. But there's a growing sense that deeper accommodations must be made: on the one side is a swelling mass of disadvantaged people who bear the brunt of social inequity and want more reform and fairness; on the other is a large body of mid-level bureaucrats who are in a mercenary alliance with business interests and resist any structural change. Everyone knows that, in the political realm, something will eventually have to give.

Agitation for political reform has, in the past four or five years, grown more assertive, while taking on more varied and artful forms: instead of using the fraught term *ren quan* ("human rights"), for example, people talk about *fa zhi* ("the rule of law") and *wei quan* ("defending civil rights") to discuss consumer rights or migrant-labor rights or private-property rights. Each year, there are more cases in which journalists expose corruption, lawyers take up civil-rights suits in court, scholars investigate the "blank spots" of history (the Sino-Japanese War, the great famine of 1959-62, the Cultural Revolution), publishers defy taboos and print "sensitive" books. From time to time, a statement or a petition is signed by a group of people, though they usually take pains to present themselves as an assortment of individuals, rather than as an organization. Acts of this nature tend to be sporadic and spontaneous, although, with the rapid expansion of the Internet and international communication, news travels fast, and the task of controlling information becomes more daunting. On the Chinese Internet, the voices of criticism are so diverse that censors face the equivalent of a guerrilla war with a thousand fronts. For every offender who gets caught and punished, a hundred get away. These critics can't be easily located, isolated, and destroyed, the way the C.D.P. was.

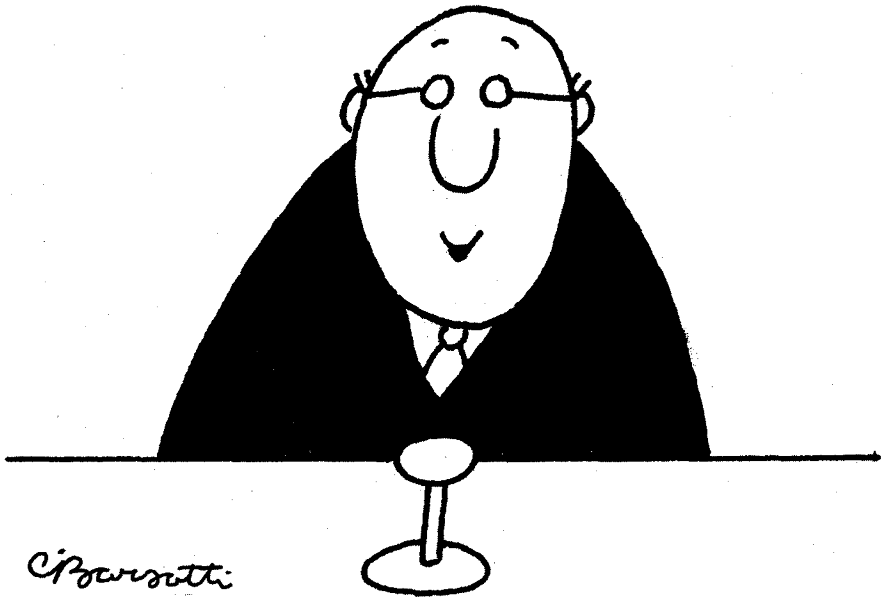
Meanwhile, globalization has made the government and the leaders more mindful of their own image. The official talk of "peaceful rising" and "building a harmonious society" in recent years reflects a softer approach in both international and domestic politics. On the whole, the political atmosphere in China really has eased, and people are a little less afraid. In private and in public, Chinese discussions of political reform are getting louder.

So Aunt Zhong had a point when she told Jianguo that the situation in China is improving. And not everyone has forgotten the C.D.P. incident. Several of my liberal Chinese friends have told me that, thanks to men like Jianguo, who tested "the baseline" with their lives, others now know exactly how far they can push. As one of them, Cui Weiping, put it, "The officials think of us as moderates because of them. They are the reason we are not in prison. For this alone we are grateful." Cui, a literary and film critic, has translated Havel's essays into Chinese. She writes publicly about the need to build civil society in order to battle totalitarian culture. She respects men like Jianguo but says that "real change will come from small, ignoble places. Social movements, not the élite or lone heroes, are going to make history."

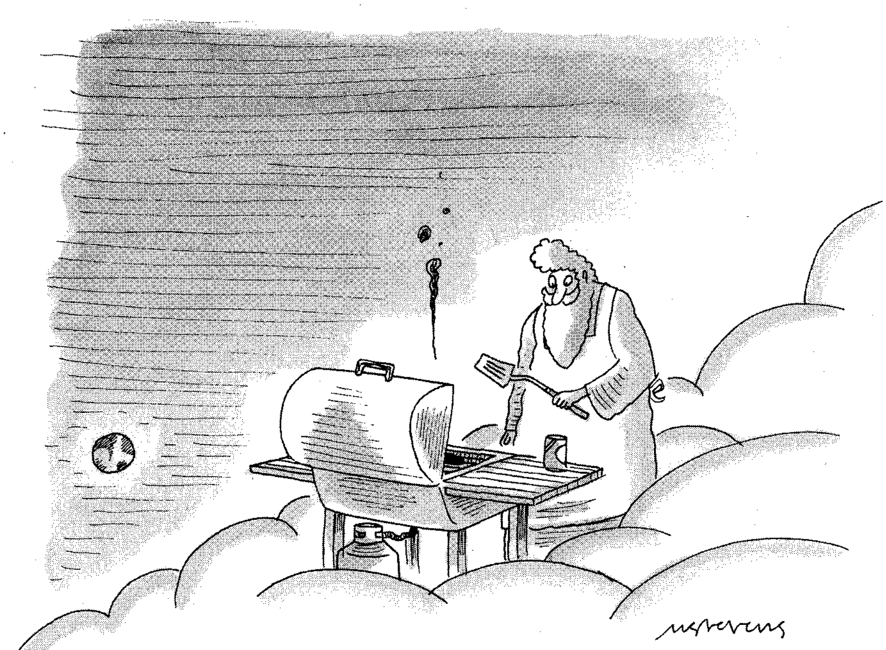
Another prominent liberal figure, Xu Youyu, a philosopher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a forceful advocate of political reform, told me that he would never make "foolish decisions" such as those made by the C.D.P. founders. "It was stupid in terms of political strategy," he said. Xu, who is well-versed in Western analytical philosophy and liberal theory, emphasizes the importance of "rational analysis" before taking any action. "Perhaps they were eager to set a record—to be the first to openly form an opposition party in Communist China," Xu said. "If that's what motivated them, it's the sort of human weakness I could forgive." Like Jianguo, Xu had been a Red Guard, and he has written a candid and moving memoir about the Cultural Revolution, with soul-searching reflections on his own youthful delusions. He signed a copy for Jianguo and asked me to bring it to him. Not surprisingly, the censor at the prison book desk rejected it.

But Jianguo isn't an educator, like Xu. He's a man of action. The C.D.P. founders are all men of action, and history has not been kind to them. I remember something I heard a Chinese C.E.O. once say: "The person who takes one step ahead of others is a leader. The person who takes three steps ahead of others is a martyr." The C.D.P. men are martyrs. I used to console myself with the old Chinese saying "*Bu yi chengbai lun yingxiong*"—"Do not judge a hero by victory or defeat." Yet Jianguo also seems a mulish simpleton, a man with a black-and-white vision of politics, oblivious of all shades of gray, not to mention the rainbow of hues that you'd need to paint a semblance of Chinese life today. In other moods, I would think of Confucius' remark about one of his disciples, Zilu: "He has daring, but little else."

Neither attitude seems quite right to me now. I recall a conversation I had with Perry Link, a distinguished China scholar at Princeton, about Wei Jingsheng. Wei is Jianguo's personal hero, a legendary figure in the Chinese democracy movement. Back in 1978, when he was a twenty-eight-year-old electrician, Wei had the audacity to post essays on the Democracy Wall demanding democratization; Deng Xiaoping, he said, was a dictator. Wei was charged, absurdly, with "leaking state secrets," and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. During his time behind bars, through sickness and periods of solitary confinement, he never backed away from his views. Once he had been released, he immediately resumed his pro-democracy writing and activities, and was sent back to prison. After serving two years of a fourteen-year sentence, he was freed, ostensibly for "medical reasons,"



"It wasn't a lie, Senator, it was a larger truth."



ON THE SEVENTH DAY

and flown to the United States, where he kept up his personal campaign against the Chinese government. The West must not be fooled by its reforms, he warns, for the Communist Party will never change its true nature. What's certain is that Wei will never change. Over time, many of his early admirers have come to see him as a man with a simplistic, static vision of China and the Chinese Communist Party. In fact, the Party appears to be far more agile and adaptive than Wei Jingsheng.

I told Perry about my ambivalence toward people like my brother and Wei. I admired their courage, their deep sense of justice, but felt uncomfortable with their almost religious sense of self-certainty. "People like Wei Jingsheng are like the North Pole," he told me. "They are frozen, but they define a pole."

Yes, I thought, my brother is frozen, with his unchanging, unchangeable vision of what is to be done. He reduces a vast, complicated tangle of problems to a single point source of evil: the Communist Party. End one-party rule, and the evil is eradicated. Even as he is locked up, he has locked the world out, refusing to listen to anything that disturbs his convictions, closing his eyes to a reality ridden with contradictions, ambiguities, and possibilities. For all this, Perry is right: people like Jianguo define a pole.

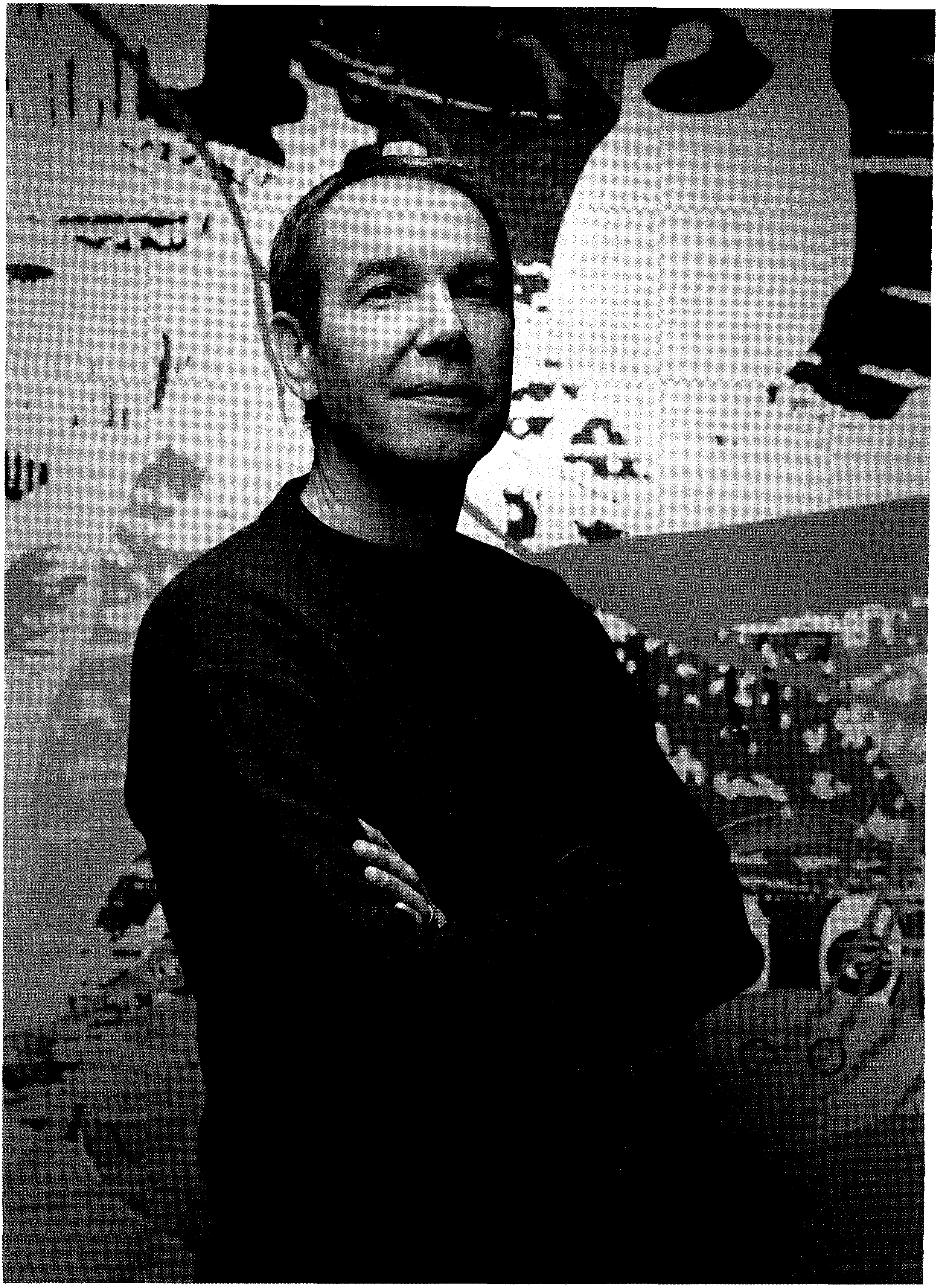
And, of course, those who locked him up are on the wrong side of history. Liu Ge, a friend who is a partner at an illustrious Beijing law firm, likes to remind me of this. "All the countries that have succeeded in modernization have a multiparty system, while those sticking to one-party rule are losers," Liu said. "Democracy makes a country win and dictatorship makes a country lose. The rulers today want to make China better, and they have done a lot of things well, but they cannot face their ugly past, how they turned China into a place with a hundred holes and a thousand wounds, the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward, and so on. So they are not confident enough to take radical critics like your brother."

Gradually, though, I have come to feel a certain degree of impatience with the impulse to see Jianguo mainly through the lens of Chinese politics. I'd rather see my brother not as an integer in the realm of political calculation but as a flawed but admirable human being, with perhaps one striking oddity—his uncompromising insistence on upholding his idealism at any cost. A novelist friend of mine who has listened to me talk about Jianguo over the years once compared him to the creatures she'd seen in the 2005 documentary "March of the Penguins." "The penguins are silly, laughable creatures—they are fat, they waddle, they fall on their belly, and they are single-minded," she said. "But when they are in the water they are beautiful! What your brother does politically is absurd, but his idealism and his courage in their purity are beautiful."

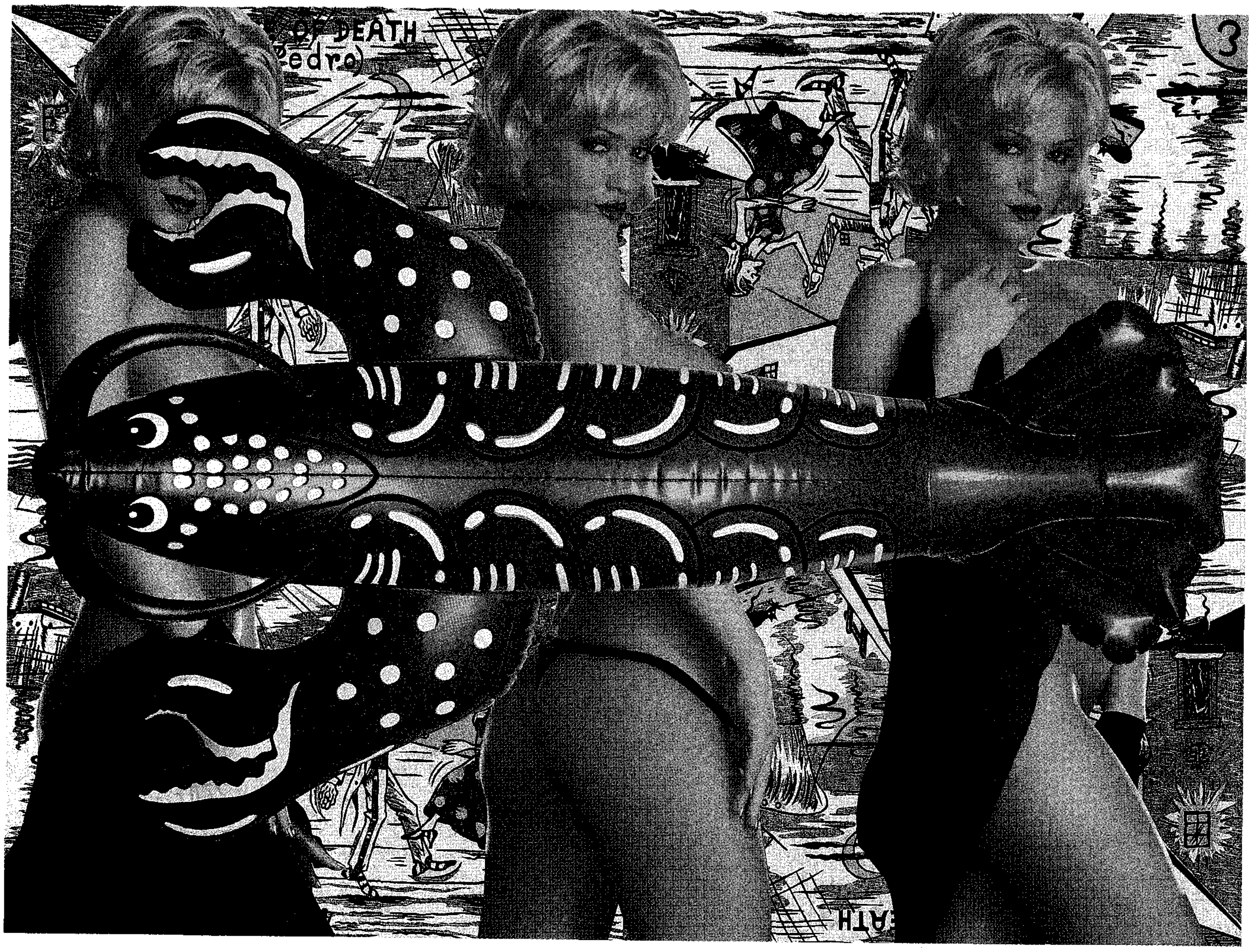
Maybe the question of whether Jianguo is a hero or a fool is beside the point. Above and beyond the consequences of his action is the moral meaning of his action. By keeping his promise to himself, he has fulfilled his own vision of a righteous life, his own sense of purpose. During one of my prison visits, I mentioned that a former classmate of Jianguo's, an expert on rural issues, had just won a prestigious official award. "That's good," Jianguo replied. "He helps the reform from within the system. I'm outside the system. There are a lot of big intellectuals who can help reform with their knowledge. I don't have enough systematic education to do that. But people like us have a role to play, too." He smiled at me. "Character is fate. Just remember this: your brother is a simple, old-fashioned, outdated, and stubborn man. Once I make up my mind, I stick to it." In the past few years, he has lost much of his hair, and a recent attack of shingles had left some scabs on his forehead, but his face was as serene as I'd ever seen it.

With a year and a half to go, Jianguo has started talking about how many books he'd like to finish reading. "Really, it's not bad here," he assured me recently. "I'll get out in 2008, and if you are in Beijing then we'll watch the Olympics together." We spoke about several of our Shanghai cousins, all successful businessmen and lawyers. "I'm very happy they do well in their business," Jianguo said. "But each person has his own goal. To achieve democracy in a country, some people must offer their blood and lives in the struggle. Look at South Korea, or Taiwan: there had been so many crackdowns, so many prisoners. But, wave after wave, individuals rose up. They gave their lives to pave the way to their democracy."

His eyes were intent, his gestures expansive; for a moment, you could tell, he had even forgotten that he was in prison. "China is a huge country," he went on. "We have 1.3 billion people. We ought to have at least a few men who are willing to do this." ♦



OPPOSITE: COURTESY JEFF KOONS; DETAIL, COURTESY RENZO PIANO BUILDING WORKSHOP / LACMA


OF DEATH
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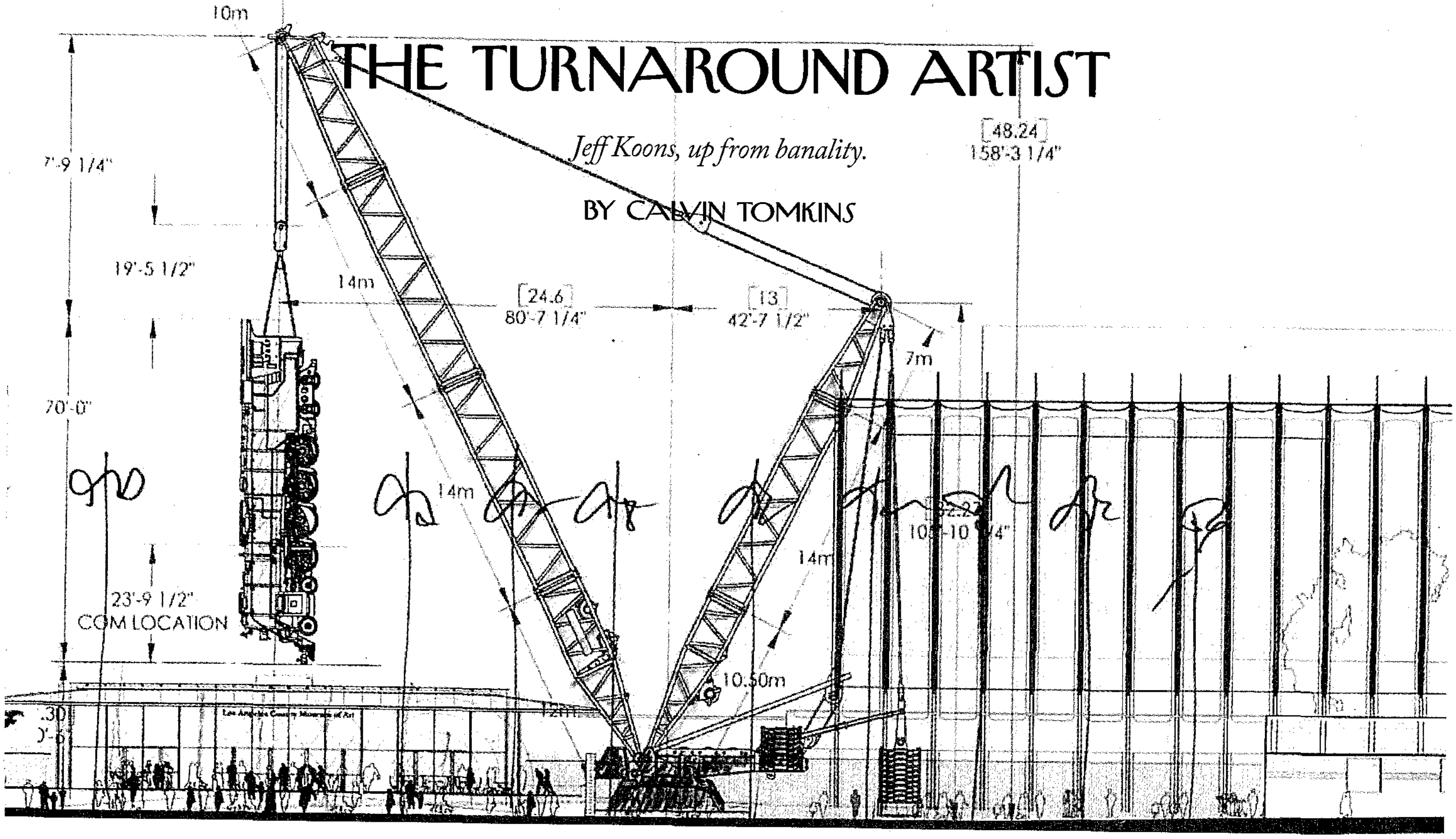
PROFILES

THE TURNAROUND ARTIST

Jeff Koons, up from banality.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS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10.50m
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

If art is ever delivered from the grip of postmodern irony, a large share of the credit will go to Jeff Koons. You may think I'm joking. Jeff Koons? The artist whose industrial-scale replicas of balloon animals, gift-shop tchotchkes, and other commercial kitsch now sell for upward of two million dollars? If there is irony here, it is lost on the artist. "In this century, there was Picasso and Duchamp," Koons announced in 1990. "Now I'm taking us out of the twentieth century."

In the Chelsea commercial building that he calls his studio, Koons currently employs more than eighty people. Six or seven of them sat before large-screen computers in the outer office when the artist met me there recently. Koons, who is fifty-two, looks very much the same as he did at thirty—trim and boyish, with neatly barbered brown hair and the sort of unfinished features that seem to be peculiarly American. He was eager to show me around. In a large room behind the office, more than twenty new paintings were in various stages of completion. They would be shown in June at the Gagosian gallery in London, and the studio was on a tight schedule. Each canvas in progress had three people working on it. They concentrated on very small areas at a time, copying from digital printouts in which the colors were marked and identified by number.

Most of the new paintings, which were very large, displayed a kaleidoscopic mixture of computer-based images—inflatable toys, cartoon monkey heads, a freight train, a horse-drawn carriage, landscapes, steam whistles, naked girls—interlaced with abstract passages, and presented in a rollicking collage style that included overlays of stencilled dots. It was hard to make out what was going on in some of them, and Koons's running commentary, enthusiastic but disjointed, wasn't much help. "That's a 'Triple Elvis,'" he said, of a canvas with three nearly life-size images of a recent *Playboy* centerfold model, whose facial expression reminded Koons (somewhat miraculously, I thought) of Elvis Presley. "I liked Elvis," he said, "and I liked using the reference to Andy Warhol's Elvis paintings. And the lobster there"—a swimming-pool toy in the shape of a lobster—"that refers to Dali, and to Duchamp." Several paintings were dominated by menacing images of the Incredible Hulk, all green skin and purple tights. "The Hulk represents for me both Western and Eastern culture, and the sense of a guardian, a protector, and at the same time this sense of power," Koons said, quite seriously. "All these paintings are about power. I want to connect people to humanity, and hopefully the parameters of everyone's life can become larger."

Fine with me. While I tend to agree with the critics who say that Koons's best work is in three dimensions, I liked the bursting energy and declarative precision of these paintings. The colors were hard and bright, with many subtle gradations. There was an impersonal intensity to the work, a flat, in-your-face authority that was nevertheless unmistakably Koonsian; it makes James Rosenquist, whose subject matter and collagist technique are somewhat similar, look by comparison like an intuitive artist of an earlier period. Koons himself rarely touches brush to canvas. His first idea for a painting may be a photograph that he takes himself, scans into a computer, and manipulates or combines with other found images; from there to the final sign-off, he controls every step in what is essentially an industrial process, prowling the studio with Argus-eyed attention to the exact carrying out of his most minute decisions. (There is no room for individual initiative in this shop.) I'm also O.K. with Koons's often perplexing references to other artists in his work, having learned that, like many of the weird-sounding things he says, they usually have some basis in logic. There are no lobsters in Duchamp's work, so far as I know (there are in Dali's), but then, as Koons tells you, the arc formed by an inflatable lobster's tentacles can suggest a handlebar mustache, and one of Duchamp's famous actions was to draw a mustache on a reproduction of the Mona Lisa. Duchamp also invented the concept of the "readymade," a common object promoted to artistic status, and the readymade is the Rosetta stone of Koons's art.

The painting studio was only one of many in the House of Koons. He led me, through labyrinthine passages, on a tour of the others, seven in all, where squads of assistants polished and spray-painted, measured and calculated, made molds, removed imperfections, scanned dimensions into computers, and devoted other skills to the perfect replication of cheap plastic toys. The obvious analogy to Santa's workshop fades when you realize that months and sometimes years are needed to bring these objects to the level of smoothly detailed perfection that Koons requires. In one area, there were several sculptures of a gaily painted caterpillar suspended from eight red-link chains; the model was clearly a child's pull toy, but Koons called it "an ecstasy piece," whose chains might suggest "the pain and passion of a martyred saint." Koons's references to the spiritual dimensions of his art take some getting used to. A few years ago, he told me, "I've always wanted the viewer to feel a sense of security in the work—a kind of spiritual trust in that image or object."

On the return trip through the labyrinth, he paused to demonstrate a small-scale model of his latest sculptural project, a full-size re-creation of a 1943 Baldwin locomotive, hanging nose down from an industrial crane. Koons plugged in an electrical cord, and the toy locomotive's wheels slowly began turning. "This is Wilshire Boulevard right here," Koons said, excitement quickening his voice. (The plan is to situate the suspended locomotive at the entrance plaza of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, on Wilshire.) "And this is the big new contemporary-art building, designed by Renzo Piano. So, to get into the museum, you'll go under the train. It will operate three times a day—at noontime, and at three o'clock, and at six o'clock." The model locomotive's wheels were speeding up. Its brass bell tinkled, and a curl of smoke emerged from the smokestack while Koons continued to describe the future behemoth. "The locomotive is seventy feet long—it's the 2900 series, among the largest steam engines ever built. The wheels are eighty inches tall. The real thing weighs five hundred thousand pounds—ours will be lighter than that, but the outside will look absolutely identical to the original. Every rivet, every bit of texture will be authentic." The wheels were racing now. Smoke poured from the tiny smokestack, and the whistle sounded a mournful *whooo-whooo*. Almost immediately, the locomotive began slowing down. "The running time is five minutes," Koons said. "Kids will want to lie down under it. Nothing has ever been more powerful than the image of a steam engine.”

The train project could cost as much as twenty million dollars. For an artist like Koons, whose vast ambition and ruinous needs have severely strained the resources of several dealers and nearly bankrupted him, this obstacle seemed surmountable. The train, he said, would be up and running in two and a half to three years.

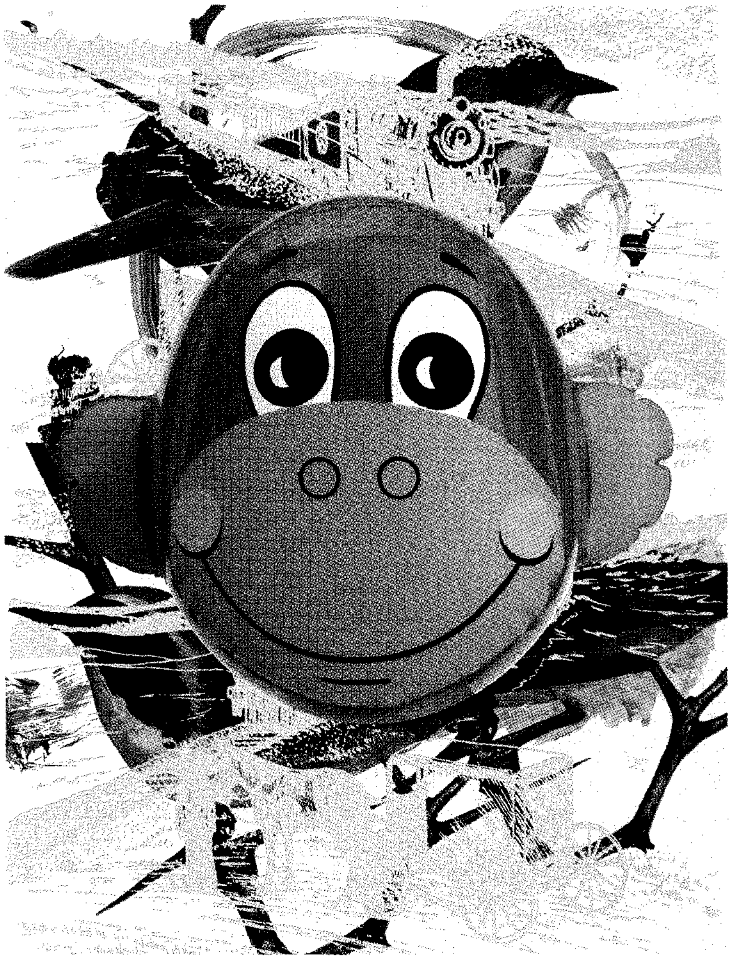
Although I met Jeff Koons in 1986, I didn't really get to know him until 1990, at the Venice Biennale, where he was showing the first fruits of his “Made in Heaven” series in the Biennale's *aperto* (or “open”) exhibition. These sexually explicit, photo-based images of Koons, buck naked, in a variety of erotic embraces with the Italian porn star La Cicciolina, who wore white net stockings, a filmy bustier, and a floral headdress, attracted awed crowds. So did Koons and Cicciolina. Hordes of paparazzi followed them through the streets, begging for poses and autographs. In Italy at that time, Cicciolina was a much bigger attraction than Koons. She was serving as a deputy in the Italian parliament, but she also found time to continue the stage performances—some of them involving a compliant snake—that had made her Italy's top porn goddess.

Hungarian-born—her real name is Ilona Staller—she had white-blond hair, dark eyebrows, and pale, luminescent skin. There was an unexpected sweetness about her, a delicacy that Koons had responded to in the three paintings and one large, carved-wood sculpture on view at the Biennale, all of which seemed to be adrift in flowers, birds, butterflies, and rosy colors. She had never heard of him before they met. After seeing her picture in two European magazines, he had flown to Rome, watched her perform, and gone backstage to suggest that they collaborate on what he then thought would be a movie. She agreed. A series of strenuous photographic sessions became the basis for the “Made in Heaven” paintings and sculptures, in various media. The movie never got made, but Koons and Staller fell in love, or anyway he did. He courted her through an interpreter—she spoke very little English, and Koons, who spoke about four words of Italian, kept trying to communicate directly by speaking English with an Italian accent. The interpreter had to be let go, because she fell in love with Koons. He proposed to Staller in Venice that spring, and they were married a year later.

When “Made in Heaven” was shown in New York, in 1991, at the Sonnabend gallery, the reviews were venomous. Some of the post-Venice images were a lot more explicit than the earlier ones—the gallery posted a warning notice about the hard-core subject matter—but that wasn't what riled the New York critics. It was what they saw as the artist's lust for notoriety, and his loopy rhetoric; he kept saying that his goal was to remove fear and guilt and shame, so that when viewers saw these images they would be in “the realm of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.”

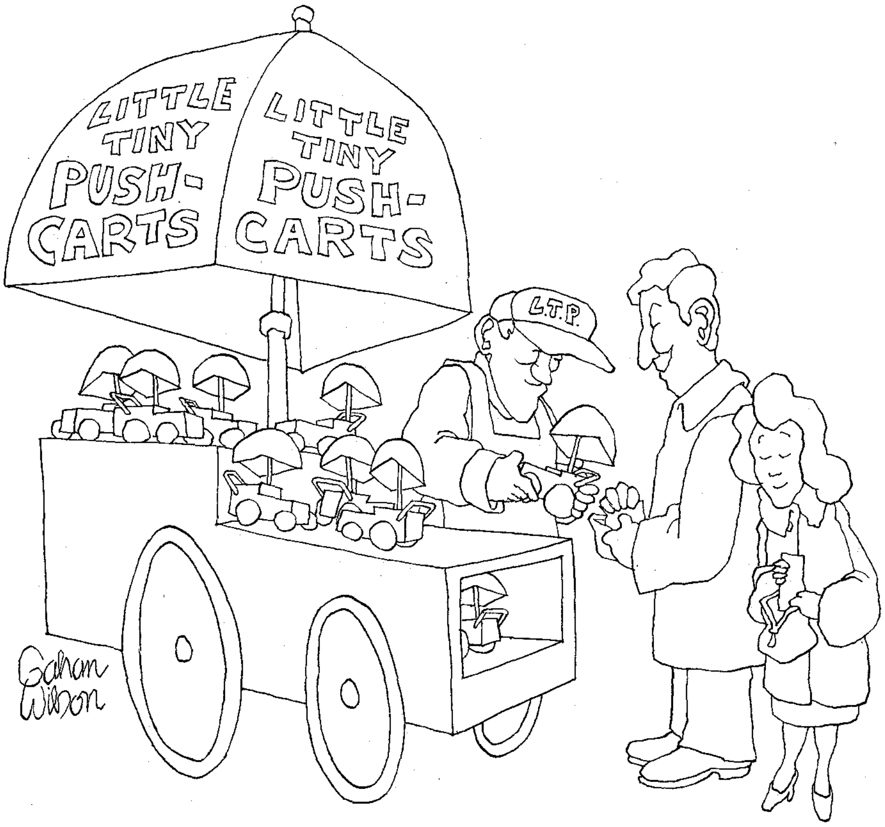
In the *Times*, Michael Kimmelman wrote, “Just when it looked as if the '80s were finally over, Jeff Koons has provided one last, pathetic gasp of the sort of self-promoting hype and sensationalism that characterized the worst of the decade.” The show coincided with a sudden cooling in the overheated art market of the late eighties. Sonnabend had trouble selling the works (no museum would go near them), but what bothered Koons most was the sense of being misunderstood. “Sex with love is a higher state,” he told an interviewer. “It's an objective state, in which one lives and enters the eternal, and I believe that's what I showed people. That's why it wasn't pornographic.” Although the viewer might conceivably miss the higher state invoked here, the images were curiously non-arousing; they lacked the necessary artlessness of pure porn. Koons, at any rate, was severely disheartened. “I'm always very upset if somebody doesn't like my work, because I never want to lose anyone,” he told me. “I feel like I've failed if I do that.”

He made up for the failure soon enough. A year later, in 1992, his “Puppy” made its début in the German town of Arolsen. A monumental, forty-foot-high topiary likeness of a West Highland terrier, with thousands and thousands of blooming flowers blanket-



COURTESY JEFF KOONS

Previous spread: Koons in his Chelsea studio, photographed by Robert Maxwell; “Triple Elvis” (2007); a drawing for the sculpture Koons plans to install outside the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Above: “Monkey Train (Birds)” (2007).



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ing the steel-and-wood structure, it has been re-created since then in Sydney and Bilbao and at Rockefeller Center, and in each place multitudes of viewers (and even art critics) have surrendered to its appeal. " 'Puppy' renders all who see it equal," Jerry Saltz wrote in the *Village Voice*. "It is the rare work of art that laymen can talk about with the same degree of confidence and authority that those in the art world bring to it." Koons, in full evangelical mode, said that he "wanted the piece to deal with the human condition, and this condition in relation to God. I wanted it to be a contemporary Sacred Heart of Jesus."

Aware that Koons's only brushes with religious observance had occurred during sporadic, seasonal visits to a Lutheran church in York, Pennsylvania, when he was growing up, I asked him what he meant by the Sacred Heart of Jesus. "It doesn't come from any religious background," he conceded. "Just from sort of absorbing Baroque culture, Catholicism in church imagery." Some of the erotic poses that he and Staller assumed in "Made in Heaven" were based on European paintings of saints in ecstasy, as he pointed out, and in one of them he was channelling Michelangelo's Adam. Whatever the Sacred Heart of Jesus meant to him (I never did get clear on that), Koons was quite serious about the shame and guilt thing. "When I look at a painting like 'Ilona's Asshole,' " he said, referring to one of the raunchier examples in the series, "I'm very proud of it. I think it's a really wonderful painting. I like that it's close up, because guilt and shame about the body, especially when seen close up, have a certain intensity. If you look at Ilona's ass, there are pimples on it, and there's such a sense of humanity in that, and oneness with the world and with nature."

Jeffrey Deitch, a close friend who became Koons's dealer after Sonnabend, couldn't understand the marriage to Staller. Koons himself says that Ileana Sonnabend and his father had warned him against it, fearing the worst. "Jeff had confused fantasy with reality," Deitch said. "It was as though he felt the 'Made in Heaven' work wouldn't be authentic unless they were married. It was a moral issue for him." The marriage began to fall apart even before their child, Ludwig, was born, in 1992. Staller wanted to keep on performing. (She also offered, publicly, to have sex with Saddam Hussein in exchange for his releasing foreigners held in Iraq.) And then, after divorce proceedings had begun in New York, Staller spirited baby Ludwig out of the New York town house that Koons had rented for them and took him to Rome. Koons spent more than a decade and millions of dollars in legal battles over custody—which the court here had awarded him—but the Italian court eventually ruled in Staller's favor. For the past few years, Koons has been unable to see or talk to his son.

"When I look back," Koons told me recently, "I realize that I loved Ilona very much. And I was really embracing the philosophy of my work, which tries to tell the viewer that everybody's cultural history is perfect, and should be accepted without embarrassment. Accepting Ilona's history was an example. But you can't change somebody who was involved in the profession she was involved in." Did you think you could? I asked him. "I didn't want to change her," he said quietly. "I thought she wanted to change."

It takes three and a half hours to drive from Manhattan to Red Lion, Pennsylvania. Jeff Koons, his wife, Justine, whom he married five years ago, and their three young boys—Sean, who is five, Kurt, three, and Blake, eighteen months—make the trip nearly every weekend, winter and summer, to a hundred-and-seventy-acre farm that once belonged to Koons's maternal grandparents. Koons bought back the property two years ago, and he is restoring the houses, the barns, and the grounds to look (with a few additions) the way they did when he was a boy: the same bright-yellow exteriors, with red trim; the same low stone walls defining the fields and rolling hillsides. "It's really about letting my family bathe in a culture that's very different from what they experience in New York," he says, meaning the rural, middle-class culture that he bathed in so happily as a child.

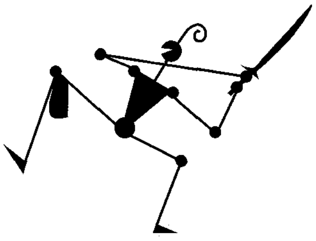
Koons, who was born in 1955, spent his first years in York, an old industrial city a few miles north of Red Lion. His father, Henry J. Koons, was an interior decorator who had his own furniture store there. "My parents were very happily married," Koons recalls. "My father worked hard, and I always had the sense that we were thriving—enjoying social mobility." (Henry Koons's father had been a streetcar conductor; the covered-over tracks of his trolley line ran right past the suburban house that Jeff and his family moved to when he was four.) In Jeff's early memories, visits to the farm are still vivid. Ralph Sitler, his maternal grandfather, was a significant figure in York—a successful merchant who got into real estate and politics and served as city treasurer. He kept ten or twelve show horses in the barn, and he also owned vintage carriages, which Jeff remembers riding in, all dressed up in a child-size tailcoat and top hat, during the Colonial Days parade. "I grew up feeling a bit like a young prince," he said.

He began drawing and painting when he was very young. "I always believed," he said, "that I got into art because my parents encouraged me to feel I had more skill in that area than my sister"—Karen, who is three years older. (She is now an environmental health-and-safety manager at a plastics company.) His father found him a teacher when he was eight, a woman in her eighties, and every Saturday he went to her basement studio. At the public school he attended, his main focus was art class. He never cared about sports. "At a certain age, I think in sixth grade, I began to feel that maybe all this art activity seemed effeminate," he said, "so I stopped taking lessons." He resumed them a few years later. His father hung Jeff's imitations of Old Master paintings in his store, and customers bought them, for several hundred dollars apiece. When it was time for college, Koons chose the Maryland Institute College of Art, in Baltimore, because "I didn't know anything else than art to do."

His first day there, in 1972, the whole class went to the Baltimore Museum of Art. Seeing paintings by Manet and other artists whom many of the students recognized right away, Koons realized that he knew nothing about art history. "I didn't know who Braque was," he said. "When I was younger, my dad never taught me football, so when I tried out for the football team the other kids all knew something about the game, but I didn't. This art experience could have been the same for me. I might have left art school. I thought about going back and raising cattle—my girlfriend's father was a farmer. But I didn't. That was a defining moment. Somehow I was able to accept my own cultural history."

His youthful self-confidence restored, he contrived to meet Salvador Dali. A coffee-table volume on Dali was one of the only art books in his parents' house, and Koons, who'd spent hours looking at it, had asked his mother if she could possibly buy him a Dali print. She discovered that Dali spent part of the year at the St. Regis hotel, in New York, and so one day, early in his freshman year, the seventeen-year-old Koons called the St. Regis and was put through to Dali. The upshot was that a week later Koons got on a bus to New York, to visit the artist. "He met me in the lobby," Koons recalls, "wearing that majestic fur coat and carrying a black cane with a silver handle. He said he had an exhibition at Knoedler"—his uptown gallery—"and would I like to see it? I told him I would love to. We went up separately to Knoedler. As I was looking at the work, he came over and asked if I wanted to photograph him, and I did; he stood in front of the painting that has a tiger and three heads of Lenin." (A year ago, Koons was able to buy a Dali study for this painting.) "I just remember leaving New York that day feeling that this type of life was accessible."

Koons's student paintings and drawings, not surprisingly, were "mainly Surrealism, things I dreamed the night before." He was in love with his college girlfriend, and when she told him she was pregnant, he said that he wanted to marry her and rear the child. Her parents intervened, insisting that they put the baby up for adoption. Koons and the girl drifted apart. After three years in Baltimore, Koons took his last year at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Here, studying with the Chicago painter Ed Paschke, he realized that he was bored by subjective art. "I no longer wanted to paint what I'd dreamed the night before," he said. "I wanted much more out of art than that."



A Patti Smith album that he heard on the radio ("Horses") triggered the decision to move to New York. He settled there in early 1977 and got a job almost immediately, selling admission tickets at the Museum of Modern Art. "It was very low pay, but I had access to the collections, and I just met people all day long," he said. Seeing works by Duchamp, Matisse, Miró, and other modern masters was enthralling enough, but meeting people, talking to them, persuading them to take out or upgrade their museum memberships—this was something he could really do. Koons, like Warhol, is a gifted salesman, but in his case the gift is generic: the all-American boy pushing his product. As a pre-teen-ager in York, he had earned pocket money by selling candy or wrapping paper or other items; one of his parents would drive him to a neighborhood and wait while he went door to door. "I always enjoyed that," he recalls. "I felt I was meeting people's needs." At MOMA, he attracted considerable attention by wearing polka-dot shirts, floral vests, big bow ties (sometimes two at once), and, occasionally, an inflatable plastic flower. Sometimes when an important personage was visiting the museum, Richard Oldenburg, the director, would come by and suggest, gently and somewhat apologetically, that Koons go out for an hour or so, but by and large the staff considered him a big asset. "People loved me," he told an interviewer, "and I doubled the membership rolls. The trick is to be outrageous but not offensive."

"Working at the Modern, I knew that I wanted to try to add something to the Duchamp tradition," he said. His approach to this cheerfully immodest goal took the form, initially, of low-rent readymades—inflatable plastic toys or flowers (like the ones he had worn to work at MOMA) resting on and backed by hardware-store mirrors. He progressed to small kitchen appliances affixed to fluorescent light tubes, and then to brand-new, top-of-the-line vacuum cleaners and rug shampooers encased in brightly lit, clear plastic vitrines. His talent for self-promotion, which had blossomed at MOMA, helped him place a few of these objects in downtown group shows, and in 1980 Marcia Tucker, the director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, did a small installation in the window of the museum's building, on Fifth Avenue.

By then, Koons had quit his job at the museum and was selling mutual funds. He got his broker's license and worked at First Investors Corporation, because he needed more money to make his art: a two- or four-vacuum-cleaner piece cost him up to three thousand dollars. Koons spent his nights at Max's Kansas City and Fanelli's Café, and he knew a lot of artists and dealers. Julian Schnabel and David Salle, rising stars of the neo-expressionist generation, recommended him to their dealer, Mary Boone, who took him on provisionally, but when she didn't offer him a one-man show soon enough he walked out. His next prospective dealer, Anina Nosei, sold a vacuum-cleaner piece for around five thousand dollars but then told him (as Koons recalls it) that she had lost interest in his work. Flat broke and about to be evicted from his apartment, Koons retreated in shame to the house his parents had moved to in Bradenton, Florida, when Henry Koons retired. (His mother, Gloria, now lives in Sarasota; Henry died in 1994.)

Six months later, he was back, selling commodities at the Siegel Trading Company and then at Clayton Brokerage. His sales pitch on the telephone was so vibrant that he often convinced himself, and bought, on his own account, shares in copper or other metals that ended up losing him large sums. "It was very, very high pressure," according to Andy Moses, another young artist-trader, who sat next to Koons at both brokerage houses. "Everything was on a commission basis, so if you didn't perform you didn't earn a dime. Jeff was such an optimist—people just wanted to be part of that personality." Selling commodities earned him enough to finance his next series of works, basketballs submerged or partly submerged in tanks of water. (The Nobel Prize winner Richard Feynman was one of many physicists he consulted, by telephone, to arrive at the correct proportions of distilled water and saline water that would keep them stable.) What he called the "Equilibrium" series—basketballs in tanks, framed Nike posters featuring professional basketball stars, and flotation devices (an aqualung, a rubber dinghy) cast in nonfloating bronze—was shown in the spring of 1985 at a new East Village gallery called International with Monument. It was Koons's first one-man gallery show. Although the boundaries of sculpture had been expanding for decades, no art gallery had shown anything remotely like this, and quite a few people—artists, especially—took notice. (Seven years later, the young British artist Damien Hirst rose to fame with a tiger shark in a tank of formaldehyde.) Koons quit selling commodities to concentrate on art.

For a year or so, he worked mainly in stainless steel, a material whose impersonal, reflective brilliance he found "intoxicating." His second show at International with Monument, in 1986, featured stainless-steel casts of liquor paraphernalia, including a travel bar and a model train whose seven cars held a fifth of Jim Beam bourbon each. The "Statuary" works that came next were readymade novelty items, recast in stainless steel and related only by their kitsch origins: a dime-store bust of Louis XIV, a Bob Hope figurine, a lecherous doctor and his female patient, a refulgent, stainless-steel bunny similar to a plastic one that he had used in one of his early inflatables. All these items were issued in editions of three, plus one artist's proof. Charles Saatchi, the influential British collector, paid seventy-five thousand dollars for a cast of the bourbon train. The critics were fascinated. Reviewing the eye-opening, four-artist "Neo-Geo" show, at Sonnabend in 1986, in which the "Statuary" pieces made their début, the *Times'* Roberta Smith praised Koons for "creating works of a strange, disembodied beauty that expand our notion of what sculpture is and means," and went on to cite his "Rabbit" as "a dazzling update on Brancusi's perfect forms."

Koons, whom I met around this time, struck me as an odd, amorphous presence, someone who was either amazingly naïve or slyly performative. In his soft-spoken way, he could sound like a motivational speaker; this made me (and a lot of other people) wonder if I was talking to the real Jeff Koons, or if there even was one. I decided that he was on the level, and that he had virtually no sense of humor, about his work or anything else. Nobody could figure out what he was up to. Was he satirizing the mass-market culture that produced these tawdry souvenir-shop items, or celebrating it? When the same question was asked about Pop art in the sixties, there were similar uncertainties. Warhol said that Pop was about "liking things," but people tended to assume that everything Warhol did or said was in some sense a put-on. Pop harbored enough irony to give it the benefit of the doubt, at any rate, and only the mossback modernist critics condemned it as pandering to mass culture. Koons seemed to strive for art-world approval while reaching beyond it, to a mass audience whose tastes he shared. The formalist academic critics managed to avoid commenting on his work at all; to this day, it has been invisible to them. Yet there was no denying the fascination of his perfectly rendered objects. Casting them in stainless steel seemed both to glamorize and to dignify them. The bright-silver bunny, with its evocative carrot, really did look like a Brancusi.

The next show, which Koons called "Banality," made him the art world's new superstar. Opening simultaneously at three galleries, in November, 1988—Sonnabend in New York; Max Hetzler, in Cologne; and Donald Young, in Chicago—it offered twenty fairly large sculptures in wood or porcelain, handmade by traditional craftsmen in Europe. Koons had spent many months tracking down the best wood-carvers in Germany and Italy. He had visited more than two hundred artisan workshops. And what had he inspired his master craftsmen to create? A pair of carved-wood, clothes-wearing "Winter Bears," grinning and waving their paws. A semi-nude girl embracing a somewhat uneasy-looking Pink Panther. A nearly life-size, gold-and-white ceramic likeness of Michael Jackson with his pet monkey. And, perhaps the key image, a wood carving of two cherubs and a human child (Koons himself) coaxing a very large pig to move forward. This one was entitled "Ushering in Banality."

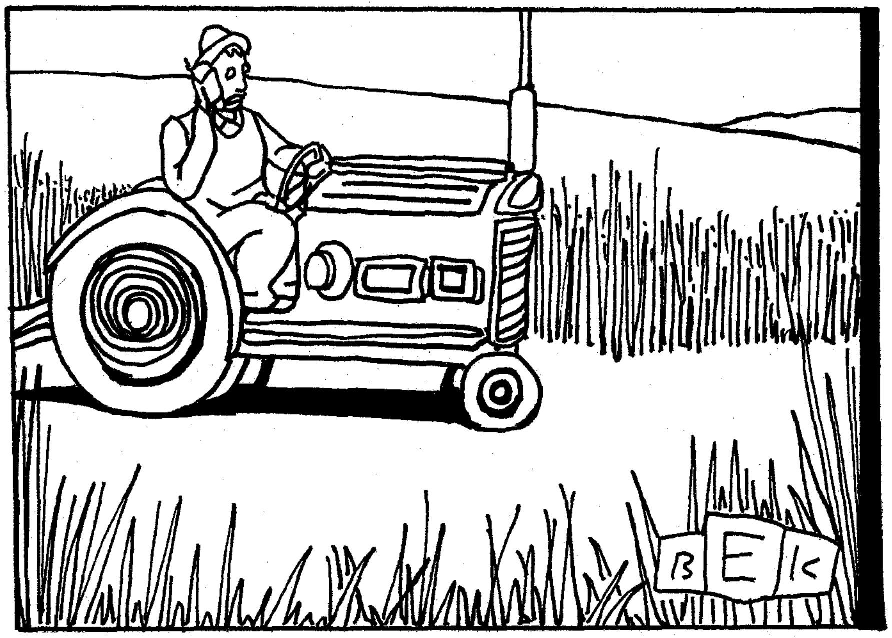
The critical reaction was mixed. Hedging his bets in the *Times*, Michael Brenson wrote that "the blend of sincerity and scheming, cleanness and crassness, chastity and corruption, presents an impossible contradiction." Klaus Kertess, in the art journal *Parkett,* hailed "the tonic innocence of pure tastelessness." Once again, many viewers couldn't decide whether Koons was serious or kidding, but by now that hardly mattered. Whatever you thought of it, the work registered in the public's consciousness, in some cases indelibly. A few critics and others saw the show as part of a new, object-oriented wave of Pop art and, as such, a bracing alternative to the turgidities and bombasitudes of neo-expressionism. "Banality" earned everyone a lot of money, at any rate, and unleashed a flood of Koonsian rhetoric, recorded in countless interviews. He announced that everything in the show was a metaphor for the viewer's shame and guilt. The average person liked banal imagery, but art, "which can be a horrible discriminator," had made people ashamed of their tastes.

It is possible to argue that no real connection exists between Koons's work and what he says about it. I am not at all sure that the viewer Koons talks about feels guilty about his or her tastes, or that such a person looks at his work and feels better. I decided long ago that Koons believes what he says, though, and I suspect that this convincing (and obsessive) sincerity, with its roots in bourgeois middle-class values and its rejection of postmodern art theories, is a factor in the magnetic power that these absurd images—some of them, anyway—can exert over a wide gamut of viewers. Writing about "Rabbit" in 2003, Kirk Varnedoe, MOMA's chief curator of painting and sculpture, called it "one of those very rare hits at the exact center of the target." It was, he said, "a piece where a ton of contradictions (about the artist, about the time) are fused with shocking, deadpan economy into an unforgettable ingot."

After "Banality," Koons's time of troubles set in. He weathered the storm over "Made in Heaven," regained his balance with "Puppy," but then virtually sank from sight during the disastrous, decadelong struggle to complete his next, far more ambitious series of works. Called "Celebration," to honor the ardently hoped-for return of Ludwig from Rome, the series grew to include twenty large sculptures and sixteen paintings, which the Guggenheim Museum offered to show in 1996 in its new SoHo space. The subject matter this time centered on children's delights: party hats and birthday cake, Easter eggs, kittens, flowers, building blocks, a huge, lumpy mound of Play-Doh, and a "Balloon Dog" like the ones magicians twist together at kids' parties—except that the Koons version was stainless steel and stood ten feet high. When he started work on "Celebration," in 1993, Koons had left the Sonnabend gallery. He wasn't happy with the way Sonnabend had handled the production of his "Made in Heaven" works, and with his approval Jeffrey Deitch, who had recently started his own art-advisory business after ten years as an art consultant at Citibank, put together a consortium of three dealers—Anthony d'Offay, in London; Max Hetzler, in Cologne; and himself—to finance the new venture. Koons had rented a commercial loft on lower Broadway and he had begun hiring a workforce that eventually numbered more than seventy people and cost him more than half a million dollars a year in salaries and overhead.

By 1995, problems were mounting. The Pennsylvania foundry that Koons had engaged to cast his stainless-steel sculptures couldn't do the job to his exacting specifications; when he brought suit against them, the foundry's managers declared bankruptcy. Two million dollars went down the drain right there. Deitch and the other backers, with their initial investment fast running out, decided to sell some of the sculptures in advance to major collectors. A fabricator in California said that he could make the "Balloon Dog"s for a quarter of a million dollars apiece. Eli Broad, the Los Angeles art patron, and Dakis Joannou, a Greek construction entrepreneur whose collection Deitch was helping to form, agreed to buy them, for a million dollars each, but the fabrication costs soon escalated beyond that. Nobody had ever tried to make stainless-steel sculptures this complicated, and the technical problems were heightened by Koons's demand for flawless execution. He wanted true reflectability, with no visual distortions; he wanted every wrinkle and fold to look balloonlike. When promised delivery dates for the sculptures were postponed again and again, Broad grew restless. Lawsuits were bruited. Deitch, who was financially hard-pressed, sold a half interest in his gallery to Sotheby's. Koons sold most of the artist's proofs of his earlier sculp-

"Stop pretending you have Mob connections."



"Right now, I'm dealing with all this spring bullshit."

tures, along with several treasured works by Roy Lichtenstein and other artists, but that money went to pay the legal costs in his custody battle for Ludwig. His frequent trips to Rome for court appearances also played havoc with production schedules. Koons was so angry with Staller that at one point he destroyed all the "Made in Heaven" work that remained in his collection.

In 1999, the I.R.S. filed a three-million-dollar lien for back income taxes—Koons had been using payroll-tax money to cover his studio rent. When "Celebration" funding ran out, the staff was laid off, leaving a skeleton crew of two: Gary McCraw, Koons's studio manager, who had been with him since 1990, and Justine Wheeler, an artist from South Africa, who had arrived in 1995 and eventually took charge of the sculpture operation. The "Celebration" project came to a halt.

Throughout this long debacle, I never heard anyone run Koons down. There is no shortage of Schadenfreude in the art world, but most artists, and most dealers and collectors and museum people, seem unable to resist liking Koons and wishing him well. No one was surprised by his comeback, which began in 1999—that year, his 1988 "Pink Panther" sculpture sold at auction for $1.8 million, and he returned to the Sonnabend gallery. Well aware of Koons's bottomless needs and demands, Ileana Sonnabend and Antonio Homem, her gallery director and adopted son, nevertheless welcomed him back; in all likelihood they sensed (correctly, it turned out) that he was poised for a glorious second act—something that only he, among his generation of overpublicized artists, has so far managed to pull off. Koons, however, no longer confines himself to a single gallery. Larry Gagosian, the colossus of New York dealers, agreed to finance the completion of all the unfinished "Celebration" work, in exchange for exclusive rights to sell it. Some of the new paintings that Gagosian is showing in London in June will "probably" be shown at Sonnabend next year, Koons says, but he is keeping his options open. Koons has not yet had a retrospective at a New York museum; the main question seems to be which museum (or combination of museums) can do it in a way that satisfies him. "I always said, Jeff is totally ready to ruin himself, ruin me, and ruin everyone in the world for the work to be perfect," Antonio Homem told me in February. "Every time I read how cynical Jeff is, I say, 'My God, I wish he would be a little more cynical.' He's much too romantic for comfort."

Koons's turnaround was buoyed by his marriage, in 2002, to Justine Wheeler, and by the rapid-fire arrivals of his three sons. Having abandoned hope of getting Ludwig back by legal means, he still thinks the boy, who is fourteen, will one day come back on his own. Meanwhile, he delights in his new family, which now includes the daughter, Shannon Rodgers, who was put up for adoption. "One of the reasons I wanted to be famous was so that my daughter could find me," Koons has said, and, sure enough, when Shannon came of age, she tracked down both her birth parents, and came to stay with Koons during the worst period of his custody fight for Ludwig. Now thirty, married and with a child of her own, she lives in New York and sees both sets of parents often.

Three successful shows at Sonnabend (which included paintings and sculptures), plus substantial profits from sales of "Celebration" works, have enabled Koons to rebound financially and to set up the Chelsea studio, where his expenses now exceed several hundred thousand dollars a month. Koons travels regularly to California and Germany, to visit the fabrication facilities that oversee production of his large-scale sculptures, and sometimes he brings the whole family along. Last January, I arranged to meet them in Los Angeles. While the rest of the family visited the La Brea tar pits, the aquarium, and other points of interest, Koons put in long days at Carlson & Co., a plant half an hour north of L.A., which does work mainly for contemporary artists.

"This is the first time I'm seeing 'Play-Doh' on this trip," Koons told me, as we trekked through the hangarlike workspace at Carlson to where a ten-foot-high Matterhorn of white plaster dominated lesser peaks. "Play-Doh," Koons explained, is one of six "Celebration" sculptures that he is casting in polyethylene, a plastic material that is used a lot in the toy industry. "It's a very joyous, very pop material, and that's what I'm really excited about," he said. "I think that when somebody comes in contact with 'Play-Doh' he's going to feel very good." After walking around the huge lump a few times, running his hand over its surface textures and commenting approvingly, Koons clambered halfway up it, trying to remove one of the twenty-five separate, interlocking forms to show me how they fit together; he couldn't quite budge the section, so one of the Carlson employees brought over a ladder and got it out. "I've always loved the smell of Play-Doh," Koons informed me. He said that the idea for the piece had come to him on a visit with Ludwig in Rome, a dozen years ago. He had brought along some Play-Doh as a present. "Ludwig made a mound just like this on the coffee table, and then, with his arms out, he said, 'Daddy, *voilà!*'"

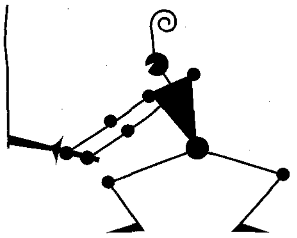
A few unfinished sculptures by other artists could be seen here and there at Carlson, but Koons's "Celebration" pieces took up most of the space. Many of them were enormous. In "Bowl with Eggs," which was being remade because it "wasn't round enough," there were eleven eggs, each larger than a beach ball. Why eleven, and not a dozen? "Because of the loss of my son, it's not complete." Two versions of "Moon," an exquisitely shaped stainless-steel orb ten feet in diameter, were at different stages of the polishing process. Like most of his stainless-steel pieces, each version would be painted a different color, making it unique; Koons had been studying color samples for the last three months. There were two new images in the room: a fourteen-foot-high rabbit and a small plaster model for an eleven-foot swan. As with "Balloon Dog," the rabbit's intimidating scale and glittering surface gave it a strange aura that oscillated between cuteness and menace, a surreal territory that is unique to Koons. His work has always had its dark side, intentional or not, but then you could say the same thing about Walt Disney. "I think of this 'Rabbit' almost like an Egyptian sun goddess," Koons said as we stood gazing up at the piece. "It's kind of vaginal."

The day after my visit to Carlson, I sat in on a meeting at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art between Koons and Michael Govan, the museum's new director. He is the man responsible for bringing the hanging-locomotive project to Los Angeles and, now, for finding the money to build it. Govan views the suspended train as both an emblem and a civic monument. "You'll be able to see the crane from the number-ten freeway, from Hollywood, from downtown," he said. "The metaphor here is to create a town square. It's like a clock tower—you'll measure your distance by it. It makes sense not only for Los Angeles but for the way we visit museums today, all the families with kids. I've always had this dream of making a museum that kids drag their parents to."

"One of the main things will be to get right under the train, so you get a sense of the power of that engine," Koons said. "This will not be an amusement-park spectacle—it will be a visceral, realistic experience. I also think the train has a tremendous sexual quality to it, but not just masculine—there's a feminine element. For the train, because it's so phallic, the whole world becomes feminine."

When Koons discusses his work these days, the sexual references seem to have eclipsed the oddball religious ones. This may reflect his life as a family man. While the new-model Jeff Koons is more relaxed and less deliberately "outrageous" than the old one, his underlying belief system is unchanged. Sitting in the bar of the Fairmont Miramar Hotel, in Santa Monica, after dinner that evening, Koons drank beer from a bottle and talked about two new sculptures he's working on in his New York studio—precise replicas of the Liberty Bell, in Philadelphia, and of the Dictator, a Civil War siege cannon with a two-and-a-half-mile range. This led, in a roundabout way, to his remembering his time at the Maryland Institute College of Art, when he had recognized and embraced his own ignorance of art history. "I realized you don't have to know anything," he said, "and I think my work always lets the viewer know that. I just try to do work that makes people feel good about themselves, their history, and their potential."

He told a story about a stainless-steel piece he had made in 1987, called "Kiepenkerl," for an outdoor sculpture exhibition in the German city of Münster. When his piece was being pulled from the mold at a local foundry, the workers damaged it badly. "It was a complete fiasco," Koons recalled. "We gave it plastic surgery, but what I realized, going through this experience, was that I didn't really care about objects at all. The people were the readymade I cared about, and that was where the art was, in the viewer. What I wanted was to help people accept their own cultural background."



Was this really how he went about leading us into the twenty-first century—by reconciling ordinary people to their tastes and preferences? His reply, an amalgam of earnest clichés, post-postmodern populism, and sincere reflection, struck me as vintage Koons. "Well," he said, "I think art takes you outside yourself, takes you past yourself. I believe that my journey has really been to remove my own anxiety. That's the key. The more anxiety you can remove, the more free you are to make that gesture, whatever the gesture is. The dialogue is first with the artist, but then it goes outward, and is shared with other people. And if the anxiety is removed everything is so close, everything is available, and it's just this little bit of confidence, or trust, that people have to delve into."

Marcel Duchamp, too, believed that the viewer was an essential part of the creative process. The artist initiated the creative act, he said, but it was up to the viewer to complete it, by interpreting its meaning and its place in art history. Although Koons's take on art, taste, and history is a long way from Duchamp's, he feels very close to what he calls "the Duchamp tradition" and, for that matter, feels connected to a great many artists, living and dead—"kind of in the sense of a family," as he puts it. He has been rebuilding his collection of works by artists he admires, including Magritte, Dali, Man Ray, and others, and he keeps in the front room of his New York studio an easel that belonged to Roy Lichtenstein, which was given to him by the artist's widow. Six or seven years ago, Koons told me that he hoped I would go and see a sculpture of his called "Split-Rocker," which had just been installed at the Palais des Papes, in Avignon. "It's beautiful," he said. "It's so good, I wish Picasso or Roy could see it. I know Picasso and Roy would give me a little pat on the shoulder, because both of them would really love it." ♦

SOMETHING LIKE HAPPY

BY JOHN BURNSIDE

The first time I saw Arthur McKechnie, he came into the bank with some checks. I had just started working there, fresh out of school and a bit nervous, I suppose, and I liked the way he behaved, all polite and quietly spoken, which was more than I could have said for some of the other customers. By the end of that first, almost wordless transaction, I had already decided he was someone I could like, but I had also noticed that he was a bit too different, one of those men who think too much about stuff that nobody else bothers with, or don't pay enough attention to other people to understand what they might do, when push comes to shove. As he stood there with the pen in his hand, very obviously reading the badge pinned to my lapel, I found myself wanting to shake him out of the little dream he was in.

Of course, I noticed the name the moment he handed over the paying-in slip. Arthur McKechnie. Everybody knew the McKechnies, and most people knew they were a bad lot. I knew them mainly because my sister Marie was going out with the worst of them. People often told Marie that Stan McKechnie wasn't right for her, which was a mistake, because all that opposition only made her more determined to stick with him. Besides, Stan was good-looking, if you didn't study him too closely. Not like this Arthur, who seemed put together from a kit, all angles and mess, with an odd cast to the eyes and a mouth that didn't look altogether finished, like the mouth in a kid's drawing. I didn't know then that he was Stan's little brother. Marie had never mentioned an Arthur, though she talked about the McKechnie sisters all the time. We all did. Some people thought the McKechnie girls were even worse than their brother, if only because they were nice-looking and dressed smart and, if you didn't know them from old, you didn't see what they were capable of until it was too late. With Stan, you knew what he was at first sight; it didn't matter how well he scrubbed up. There was a meanness in his face that you couldn't miss, unless you were Marie and wanted to miss it.

Arthur handed over the money and the paying-in slip; then, when I had processed the transaction, he took the confirmation chit and, carefully, making no attempt to hide what he was doing, wrote down on the back what it said on my lapel badge. He was a slow writer. He held his pen in an awkward way, between the first two fingers of his left hand, and he angled his arm round to make the letters, printing them out large: "FIONA, TRAINEE." He didn't seem to care that I could see what he was doing. When he was done, he looked up and nodded.

"Is there anything else I can help you with today?" I asked, not sure whether I was amused or annoyed.

He shook his head. His voice, when he talked, was soft. "Not today, thanks," he said, with an odd, even suggestive emphasis on "today." He smiled then; it was a tight, secretive kind of smile, but it wasn't mean, and I could see that he didn't think there was anything out of the ordinary in what he had just done. He wasn't being smart, or impolite. He'd just written my name on the back of his confirmation slip, the way a child would, for reasons of his own that had nothing to do with anybody else.

I wanted to say something, but I couldn't find the right words. I just shook my head ever so slightly and looked out to the line for the next customer—and Arthur McKechnie turned to go, that inward little smile on his face, a smile that I could see even then was the sign not only of a secret happiness but also of his inevitable fall. I'm not saying I knew what that fall would be, or claiming that I had some kind of premonition; God knows human beings are made for falling, and most human beings in that town were going to fall sooner rather than later. But I did see something out of the ordinary, and I'm sorry now that I didn't take more notice.

I asked Marie about Arthur when I got home that night. She was preoccupied, getting ready to go out with Stan, so I thought she'd just shrug it off, but she stopped putting on her makeup and sat looking at my reflection in the mirror, her eyeliner suspended in midair.

"Arthur?" she said. "Where did you come across *him*, for God's sake?"

"He came into the bank today," I said.

"Oh, yeah?" Her hand dropped and she grimaced. "Well, don't be getting interested in *him*. Stan says he's a nutter."

"So who is he, then?" I said, picking up some clothes that were scattered around the place. I was always picking up after Marie, even now, when we didn't share a room anymore.

"He's Stan's brother, of course," she said. "He's really pissed Stan off, though."

"Oh." I folded her powder-blue sweater and put it away in the chest of drawers. "Why's that?"

"Something to do with money," she said. She watched as I gathered up a pile of obvious laundry. "Why? You're not really *interested*, are you?"

I snorted. "Of course not," I said. "I just don't remember you ever mentioning that Stan had a brother."

"Yeah, well." A worried look crossed her face. "There's not much to talk about. I hardly noticed him at first. He's hardly ever there when I go round. When he is, he just sits in a corner, reading." The thought of it made her shiver. "Stan's old man says Arthur's not a real McKechnie. He says Margaret must have got him from some tinker woman she met outside the off-license." She started working on her makeup again. "It might even be true, for all I know. I mean, he's nothing like Stan."

"So why is Stan annoyed with him?"

Marie shook her head. "Search me," she said. "Anyway, I've got to hurry. I'm going to be late."

I studied her as she applied the finishing touches to her face. She wasn't pretty, but she tried hard. She had been working on the assembly line for three years, and though she would never have admitted it, she was jealous of me, having a good job at the bank. For her, that meant I had a future. Of course, I couldn't tell her that a future didn't mean as much to me as she thought it did. It *was* a good job, and everybody said I should be grateful; most girls from my background ended up with no prospects, just eight hours a day on the assembly line. People were always saying how lucky I was, as if I had won the lottery or something. "Where are you going, anyway?" I asked.

She stood up and gave a little twirl. "No idea," she said. "I don't think Stan's got any money."

KAREN ROBINSON "ALL DRESSED UP" (2005)/PANOS

"Well," I said. "Maybe he should ask Arthur for a loan." I smiled sweetly.

"Ha-ha," she said. "Very funny."

Marie had never thought much of me, or my taste, when it came to matters of the heart. It was probably fair to say that I was better-looking than her, and the teachers at school had always referred to me as the smart one, but it's no big secret that, with boys, giving out the right signals matters more than looks or brains. Just before this, I'd been going out with a boy called Jack, but when it didn't work out I felt an odd relief, as if I'd been released from the need to maintain some minor but time-consuming pretense. Marie had always liked the idea of love; even at nine, she'd had a boyfriend, a kid called Tony Ross, who gave her cards at Christmas and on her birthday. All through her early teens, she had very obviously *liked* boys, and they had liked her, mostly because boys like to be liked. For Marie, intelligence in a boyfriend was the worst kind of liability, and the few boys I did bring home knew how to write their own names and do basic arithmetic, at the very least. Which was more than anybody could say for Stan, and this was one of the reasons that my father got so angry with Marie a few days after I met Arthur, before he left for his shift at the works.

"Stan McKechnie will never amount to anything," he said, in his customary, quiet but final style. "He can't keep a job, he doesn't know how to handle money, he wants something for nothing. Someday he'll find out that the world doesn't owe him a living. You steer clear of him, you hear?"

Marie always seemed genuinely surprised that people thought so ill of Stan; after all, she would say, the McKechnies weren't the worst people on the estate, not by a long way. Stan had been unlucky: his mum had died when he was at a vulnerable age, and his sisters had spoiled him rotten. His dad was a bit of a rogue, everybody knew that, a rogue with a liking for the bottle, but Stan was doing the best he could, and he had big plans. He just needed a break, that was all. Of course, it was sad listening to her talk like that, and I'm not sure she even convinced herself much of the time. The fact was that after she had chosen Stan she couldn't have let go, even if she'd wanted to. She didn't want to have to admit she had made a mistake; she couldn't be seen to give in to pressure. Even when the rumor about Bobby Curran started going around, she refused to believe that Stan was involved.

"People shouldn't spread stories," she said. "Not unless they know all the facts."

The facts, it turned out, were fairly straightforward. Bobby Curran had been drinking in the White Swan when Des Cronin and his brothers came by. There had been bad blood between Des and Bobby since they'd got into a drunken argument about a motorcycle at Dave Mooney's Christmas party. Everybody knew the affair wasn't over, but nothing happened until that night in the Swan, six months later, when Des and his brothers found Bobby alone and half-cut in a place where he hardly ever drank. The Cronins were too scared of Bobby to have a square go with him; even that night, when it was three against one, they didn't do anything right away, because none of them were carrying. They couldn't have fought it out with fists and boots, like in the old days—they had to be armed. Since Des lived right across the road, all that was needed was someone to keep an eye on Bobby so he didn't leave while the Cronins ran back to Des's flat for some blades. Stan was the one who kept Bobby talking while the boys got themselves ready. Then, when Bobby went out back to the toilets, he gave the Cronins the signal and they went in.

It was over in seconds: Bobby probably didn't even know what hit him. The Cronins ran out, their clothes covered in blood, but nobody tried to stop them. Jim the Landlord came around the bar and went out the back to see what had happened, and he did first aid on Bobby while somebody called the police and most of his custom melted away, not wanting to be there when the law arrived. The only one who stayed put was Stan McKechnie. He watched the police come in, and he watched the body being taken out, and he never batted an eyelid. Nobody knows who spread it about that he'd been involved, and nobody could say for sure that the story was true, but everybody believed it—which meant that it didn't matter whether it was true or not.

It was a summer of hard, yellowish heat. The air was never quite clear anyway, because of the works, but this year it was thick and dry, like a fine material wrapped around my face and arms. The bank was supposed to be air-conditioned, but the system didn't really work; by the end of the day, I was desperate to get out to somewhere cool and wash away the thick gauze of heat on my skin. Sometimes I just went home and showered, then sat by a half-open window waiting for the night, Marie out on the town with Stan, my parents on back shift at the works or sitting downstairs watching game shows. But now and again I would go out to the old swimming hole, the place everybody called the Twenty Two, and spend half an hour or so in the water, not really swimming so much as hanging there, suspended in the rumor of coolness that rose from the depths below.

Everybody knew about the place; when I was in school, we had spent weekend afternoons out there, five or six of us going together to swim and talk and smoke cigarettes, trying out love and friendship and loneliness like teen-agers in a pop song or a movie, but we always got home in time for supper, and we spent the evenings elsewhere, at clubs and discos and pubs, dressed in the clothes we thought suited us, waiting to be seen by boys we thought we liked. Nobody ever went swimming at the Twenty Two in the evening, but that was the best time when the weather was hot. There was a current that flowed through the hole—a current that nobody could quite explain, some underground run or spring—and it was cold and quick, a near-animal force moving and turning in the water. I had always felt it, as if something alive were brushing against my skin, coming up out of the depths to pull at my legs or encircle my feet. It wasn't just a surface motion, it was bone deep, a force with a shape of its own. Maybe it was a great hank of river weed turning below in the cold current, maybe it was just the way gravity works in water, but it felt like something that matched me exactly, the same shape and weight and volume, and it always seemed as if that something came to life the moment I stepped into the water.

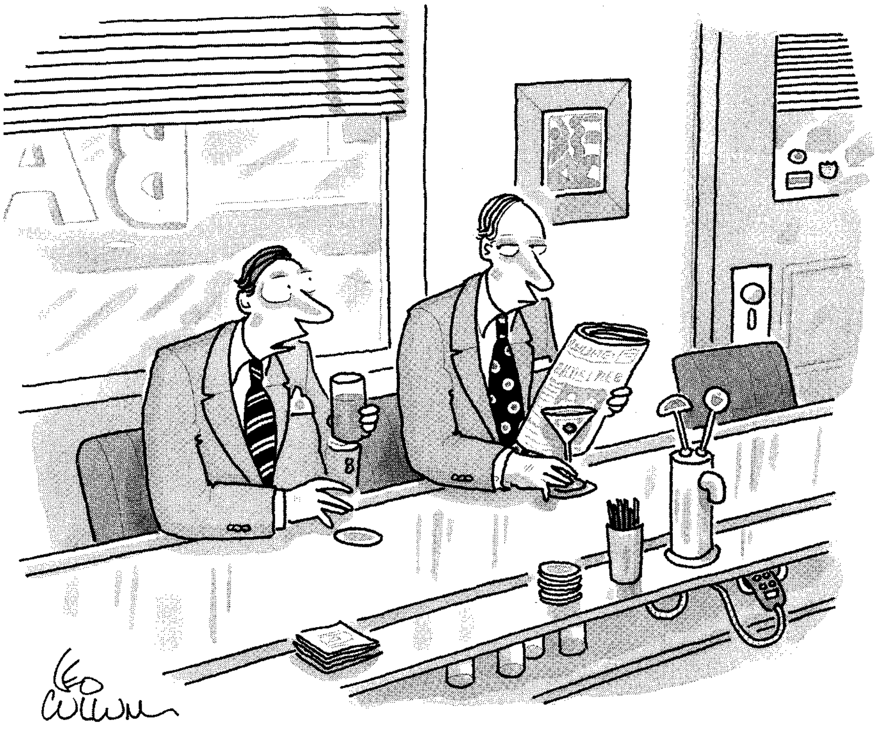
On the few occasions when I came across other people at the Twenty Two, I felt cheated, as if I had looked out of the window at home and discovered a gang of kids passing a bottle back and forth on our lawn. Mostly, though, I got to be alone. I liked to get there at about six-thirty or seven, when people were still having supper or watching television, and I would just slip into the water and swim around in circles to get cool. It wasn't exercise, like swimming in a pool. I just liked being in the water and feeling that echo of myself deep down in the current, matching my every stroke, or falling still when I stopped moving. Sometimes I swam out to the middle and stayed there, treading water, listening to the quiet that surrounded me, a hiatus in the air, like a held breath. If other people came along while I was swimming, I would hear them long before they got to me, and I would just doggy-paddle over to the bank and get my stuff together so the moment wouldn't be spoiled.

I'd never seen Arthur out there. I'd never seen him anywhere other than the bank, so it was a surprise when I caught sight of him one evening coming out of the water, white and strangely angular, in a pair of pale-blue shorts and a T-shirt, his hair plastered down over his forehead, his arms and chest glistening. I was about twenty yards away when I saw him, and before I could think it through I ducked in among some bushes. I was hoping he hadn't noticed me, I suppose, because it was embarrassing, meeting him like that, but he'd seen me, all right. I'm pretty sure he saw me before I saw him—he'd been watching me coming along the track, watching in complete silence, standing still in the cool water, waiting to see what would happen. I thought he *wanted* to embarrass me, just to see what I would do. That couldn't have been true, though, or not altogether true anyway, because he turned quickly and swam away as soon as he saw that I'd seen him. He was a good swimmer, easy and lithe, like some animal that belonged to the water, some creature of trust and grace; it was only a matter of seconds before he reached the center and dived, vanishing into the dark water as if there were a way out down there, some exit that only he knew. One minute he was there, the next he was gone, leaving barely a ripple behind.

I didn't know what to do. I stared at the point where he had disappeared, waiting for him to come up for air, curious to see if he would call out to me, or wave, or whether he would just dive again, and keep on diving till I left. It struck me then that I would have done exactly what he was doing if the roles had been reversed. I imagine I could have stayed down there for a minute or so, maybe more. Not long enough, though.

I don't know how long Arthur stayed down, but it was more than a minute. More than five minutes, probably. I kept thinking he would have to come up soon, but he didn't. He stayed under. The thought crossed my mind that the current had caught him and dragged him away; I even imagined having to go and get help, or having to dive in and save him when he came up half drowned and struggling for his life, but I didn't do anything. I just stood there. Maybe he had some trick, like that thing you see in old films, where the spy or whoever sits for hours underwater, breathing through a hollowed stick or a reed. Maybe he was ready to drown rather than admit defeat and come up again, feeling awkward and cheated. I didn't know, but I couldn't quite manage to believe he was in any danger, and after a while I didn't want to see his face, because I knew I had stolen a private moment from him. I wished I could have said something, maybe called out that I was leaving and he could come out now, but I didn't say a word. I just turned around and walked back the way I came, following the track up to the road, with the cool of the water hole at my back, and a sound I almost heard, like a bird taking flight off the surface of the water, or a fish breaking the calm in the first gray of the evening, leaping out into the dizzy, unfamiliar world, to snatch its prize.

The summer passed, the hot days fading into a wet, sticky autumn. I saw Arthur at the bank from time to time: sometimes he spoke, mostly he just handed over his little bundle of checks and the paying-in slip, with the amounts made out in his neat, slightly



"Every day I ask myself, 'Am I embezzling enough for retirement?'"

childish handwriting, but he didn't seem as distant, or as shy, as he had when he first came in. After our encounter at the Twenty Two, it was as if we had a secret between us, something we both knew about but had promised not to mention, and though nothing ever happened between us, I realized, come September, that I liked him a little, even if it wasn't a liking that Marie would have understood.

GECKOS IN OBSCURE LIGHT

Tentative, greedy, by night they came,
drawn to the insects drawn to the light.

Their shadow organs pulsed
beneath bellies distended as Falstaff's,

backs a tarnished armor studded
with the rosettes of some obscure disease.

What of their victims, the cannon fodder,
Welsh soldiery thrown each night

against the muzzle flare? Ragged, high-strung moths,
green lacewings streamlined like F-16s—

the geckos, like great officers and kings,
took them into their mouths, more or less

at leisure, with a gratifying snap.
Silently, of course, through the pane of glass,

where death comes only on a smaller scale.

—*William Logan*

Somewhere between the last warmth of the summer and the damp cool of Halloween, I noticed a change in Marie, and I knew it had something to do with Stan. I didn't know at first, though, that it also had something to do with Arthur. Stan had never treated Arthur as a brother, by all accounts, but until that summer he had mostly just ignored him. As far as Stan was concerned, Arthur really was the boy in his father's joke: a scrawny kid the tinkers didn't want, sitting in a corner of the kitchen, dreaming his life away, never saying a word. Then, that summer, everything changed. The first trouble was about money: Stan never had any, but that was no great shame till his brother started coming home with pockets full of checks and cash from his odd jobs. What was worse was that Arthur just kept squirrelling it all away in the bank: after he'd paid for his digs—which Stan almost never did—he saved whatever was left, going out every day with a packed lunch of peanut-butter sandwiches and not coming home till late, still not saying anything, but happy in a way that Stan didn't understand, happy, or something like it, as if he had lain awake one night and hatched some foolproof scheme, some plan for a future that Stan couldn't even have imagined. That went on for several weeks, and it drove Stan crazy, but he didn't say anything to Arthur. He just took it out on Marie, sulking when they went out on dates to the Hearth or the Nags. Sometimes he'd take her out, then he'd leave her at a table with a couple of the other girls while he went wandering around the lounge, talking to his mates and doing deals, the way the old married men did with their wives. He'd buy her half a lager top, then he'd be off, playing pool with somebody Marie didn't know or chatting to Jenny, behind the bar. He'd been out with Jenny once, he said. Now they were just good friends.

Marie could have sat out the sulks, if that had been all there was to it—but suddenly, with winter approaching, Arthur changed again. First, he bought a guitar. "A bloody guitar," she said. "I mean, he doesn't even know how to play."

"What kind of guitar?" I said.

She looked at me as if I were part of this great conspiracy against her happiness. "How do I know?" she said. "What difference does it make?"

I shook my head. I'd noticed a change in Arthur a week before, when he had come into the bank and, for the first time, made a withdrawal. I wouldn't have thought much about it, except that he didn't seem to know how to get money out of his account. He had to ask.

"Is it an electric guitar or an acoustic is what I mean," I said.

Marie thought a moment. "Acoustic," she said. "He just sits there, in the front room, strumming. Stan can't stand it. None of them can."

"Maybe he's going to start a band," I said.

Marie snorted. "That'll be the day," she said.

It turned out Arthur had no intention of starting a band. Stan asked him once, when Marie was there; it was an ugly little scene, with Stan and his dad poking fun at Arthur while he sat at the kitchen table, stroking the guitar strings, with his head turned away toward the window. Marie said he didn't say anything—he just sat there with a sad little smile on his face as if he felt sorry for them all, though you could see he was trying not to cry. She almost felt sorry for him herself, she said, but then he'd asked for it, really, what with his stupid guitar and his weird new clothes.

The last time I'd seen Arthur at the bank he'd been dressed as usual, in black jeans and a navy-blue shirt. "What clothes?" I asked her.

"Oh, God," Marie said. "You should see him. He's completely changed. Bright stripy shirt, this weird-looking suède jacket. At least, I think it's suède."

"When did that start?"

"Not long ago," she said. "He's completely different. He plays his guitar all day, then he goes out, nobody knows where. Stan's dad says he's got himself a fancy woman."

I shook my head. I felt strangely disappointed in Arthur, maybe for doing all this stuff in front of his dad and Stan, and maybe because I could just see him with some woman, making a fool of himself. "I don't think so," I said. "Not Arthur."

Marie laughed. It was a cruel laugh. "Oh, yes," she said. "He's fairly come out of his shell now he's got a bit of money." She gave me a hard look. "You missed your chance there," she said.

I was annoyed then. Not with her but with myself, for getting involved in the conversation in the first place. It didn't matter to me what Arthur McKechnie did. Good luck to him, if he wanted to blow his hard-earned money on the latest fashions and a guitar he couldn't play. I looked at Marie, and I saw the glint of nasty pleasure in her eyes. "You going out tonight?" I asked her.

"Of course," she said. I could see her thinking, What a stupid question.

"With Stan?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah," she said.

I nodded. "I'm not the only one who missed my chance," I said. I regretted saying it as soon as it was out.

Marie's face went very bare, then she laughed. "You're pathetic," she said, but it wasn't that convincing, and I felt even worse, not just for her but for myself, that I could be so petty.

We found out later that Arthur McKechnie mostly just got dressed up in his odd clothes and sat alone in a Chinese restaurant with a half bottle of white wine and a plate of crispy fried duck. Or he would go to a church social and hide in a corner, watching the people dance. That was probably where he met Helen Walsh, and that was when the real trouble started.

It wasn't much of a story, really. It seems that when Arthur was still in primary school Stan McKechnie and Helen Walsh were in middle school together. The Walshes lived on Gloucester Way then, two doors along from the McKechnies, and though they were never friendly—Joe Walsh always saw himself as a cut above—Stan decided that he and Helen were an item, trailing along to school beside her, trying to make conversation, doing stuff to impress her, acting as if they had something more in common than a street address. I don't think Helen ever took any of this seriously, but by the time he reached third year Stan was going around talking about her as his girlfriend, and he was upset when Joe Walsh did well and moved his family off the estate to one of those so-called executive houses with a separate dining room and French windows at the back leading onto a patio with raised flower beds and a walled yard. All the McKechnies had been upset, in their own way, to see the Walshes get on: Stan's dad resented Joe's success, saying he was just a brownnose anyhow, and the sisters put it about that May Walsh had a fondness for vodka. Stan hated the Walshes more than any of them.

"Stan's not happy," Marie told me one day after work. "Arthur keeps taking his stuff." She shook her head. "Big mistake."

"What do you mean, taking his stuff?" I couldn't imagine Arthur as a thief and, if he was, I couldn't imagine Stan having anything he might want.

"Just stupid stuff," she said. "Clothes and stuff. He says he's borrowing it, but Stan doesn't let anybody borrow his things. Can you imagine?" I shook my head to confirm that I couldn't. "And then he wears Stan's best shirt to go out on a date with that stuck-up Walsh bitch."

"He didn't."

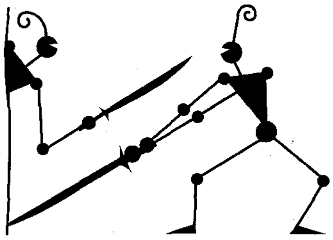
"Oh, yes."

"No," I said. "I mean, it wouldn't have been a date, would it? Can you imagine Helen with one of the McKechnies?"

Marie shot me an ugly look. "What's that supposed to mean?" she said.

"You know what I mean," I said. "I'm not talking about you and Stan—"

"Yes, you are," she said. "That's exactly what you're talking about." She lit a cigarette. She didn't usually smoke in the house, in case Dad caught her. "But me and Stan are happy. I don't care what Dad says. I love him and I'm going to marry him." She sounded like a little girl in the school playground. "And you can take a look at yourself before you start judging other people." She turned away slightly and stood looking out of the window, with her cigarette hand pressed to her cheek.



I didn't see any point in replying to that. I wasn't angry with her—I wasn't upset. For a moment, I even wanted to go over and give her a hug or something, but we didn't do that kind of thing in our family. "I'm not judging anybody," I said, after a while. "I just want you to be happy."

She looked at me then, and I could see she was close to tears. "Happy," she said quietly, as if it were some foreign word whose meaning she couldn't quite remember. She laughed. "Happy," she said again. She took a draw on the cigarette, and, in the smoke and the early evening light, she looked almost pretty, like a girl in a television show the night before she runs away from everything, written out of the script, to begin a new life somewhere else.

It snowed early that year: a freak blizzard, a beautiful anomaly. It was the kind of snow you see in films, white and perfect and deep, the cars moving slowly along white roads, the people coming out of their houses in the morning or stopping on the High Street to notice the light. For a while, it was as if the works didn't exist; the snow just kept falling, white upon white upon white, and nothing was gray or smoky or tainted enough to leave a lasting stain. It really was beautiful. People came into the bank in coats and gloves, brushing the snowflakes off their shoulders and hair at the door, smiling to themselves, gladdened by the brightness of the day. You could see the child in every face, a buried life rising to the surface, a lightness about the mouth and eyes, a childish sweetness. Everyone seemed happier, or almost everyone. Stan McKechnie wasn't happy. I would hear about it from Marie from time to time—the petty details, the black moods, the muttered threats—

but I had stopped paying attention. It just seemed too ridiculous, in all that snow and light.

The snow didn't last, though. It was replaced by a gray lull, all smoke and pig iron. So what I remember now about the day Stan McKechnie almost killed his brother is how the light changed after the snow melted. It was a day that could have happened only in a town like ours: the sun was bright, warm even, but there was a chemical haze in the air, a blurred, dusty quality to the light that we knew from having lived so long in the shadow of the works. That was what I noticed about that morning, that pale haze and the thin ferrous smell that became a taste in the mouth, part rust, part churchyard—but there was something else that day, something I hadn't felt before. If I had to describe it, I'd say it was a sense of how things must have been before any of us came to be in that place, a stubborn beauty in the light that filled the trees, a sense of the land around us, with its buried dead and its livestock and clouds and fence posts, there before we were and treating us as an exception to the norm, an ugly but fairly minor crease in the fabric of things, irrelevant to the larger picture.

The attack happened because of Stan's black sweater. That was what people said, at least, when it was all over: "That Stan McKechnie, he almost murdered his brother, all because of a sweater." Marie told me about the sweater while we were both getting ready to go out. That afternoon, Arthur had borrowed Stan's aftershave, then put on the new black sweater that Stan had bought the weekend before, even though Stan had told him a thousand times that he didn't want anybody touching his things. Nobody knew where Arthur had gone now, but Stan had rung Marie up and told her he was going to do something about it once and for all. Marie had tried to calm him down, but she knew there was no point; Stan had been heading for a big blowout for weeks, she said, and she knew trouble was coming. Nobody could have predicted how far it would go, and nobody would ever understand what had led up to the final moments. It would be just another story people told each other, another cautionary tale about the McKechnies, how in that family one brother could kick the other senseless over a borrowed sweater. Marie was so wrapped up in her own worries that she didn't even notice I was getting ready to go out. Then, when she had finished talking, and I'd told her not to worry, that it would all blow over, she realized.

"You got a date?" she asked, blurting it out, not hiding her surprise.

I laughed. "Don't sound so shocked," I said.

"Who with?"

"None of your business," I said.

"Oh, God!" She put her hands to her face. "It's not Arthur, is it?"

I looked at her. She was serious, but I could see in her face that she wasn't concerned about me—she just didn't want this mess to get any bigger than it already was. I shook my head.

"It's not, is it?" she asked again. "Please tell me it's not."

I was tempted then to tell her it was, just to see the look on her face, but I didn't. I just shook my head again. "Don't be daft," I said.

It wasn't a real date, anyway. Somebody from the bank had asked me out, a tall, thin man called Peter who worked in business and foreign. He was a bit older than me, but I'd been bored and surprised when he asked, and I'd accepted his invitation to go for a drink at the Falcon before I even registered what was happening. That's how it goes in the workplace. All these office romances start out of boredom and wanting something to happen to break the monotony. As things turned out, it was a pretty monotonous evening, and I was regretting my mistake long before Arthur came into the lounge bar and stood waiting for someone to serve him. He was alone, all dressed up in Stan's black sweater and a pair of greenish trousers; maybe he was meeting somebody, maybe he was just out to see what was happening. One thing I knew for sure was he wasn't on a date with Helen Walsh. As I sat listening to Peter going on about his plans for the future, I watched Arthur order his drink, a lager top, and it occurred to me that I didn't really know him. I told myself that it would be a mistake to get mixed up in his feud with Stan, that I really ought to mind my own business, but I was bored with Peter's supposed prospects, and I was grateful for any excuse to get away from him, if only for a few minutes. Peter didn't seem to mind when I told him there was someone I had to talk to. "Family business," I said, by way of explanation. He just nodded and took a sip of his beer. Maybe he was bored with me, too.

Arthur didn't see me coming. He hadn't even noticed me when he came in, or maybe he had and didn't want me to know. When he finally turned his head and saw me I knew I was making a mistake. Only it was too late to go back. I gave him a serious look. "Nice sweater," I said.

He put his glass down on the bar and looked at me. He knew who I was, but he was surprised that I'd spoken. "Thanks," he said. "It's not mine. I just borrowed it."

"It suits you," I said.

"Thanks."

"You know, Stan's looking for you," I said. The sooner I said what I had to say, I thought, the sooner we could get away from each other.

He looked puzzled. "Sorry?" he said. The moment he spoke, though, he worked out what I meant. He shook his head. "Oh, no," he said.

"Really," I said. "He's been building up to something for a long time." I felt stupid: I sounded like somebody out of a soap. What was I doing? None of this was any of my business. I glanced back at Peter. He had gone over to play the fruit machine. I turned back to Arthur. "It's none of my business," I said. "I just thought you ought to know."

"You've got it all wrong," he said. "Stan is my brother." He studied my face. "We're *brothers*," he said.

"I know," I said. I wanted to say more, but I couldn't think of anything.

For a moment, I thought Arthur was going to laugh; then, as if noticing me for the first time, as if I were some puzzle he'd been gathering clues about for weeks and had only just solved, he gave me a serious, almost concerned look. "It's all right," he said. "I know you only mean well, but Stan's my brother. He knows I wouldn't do him any harm."

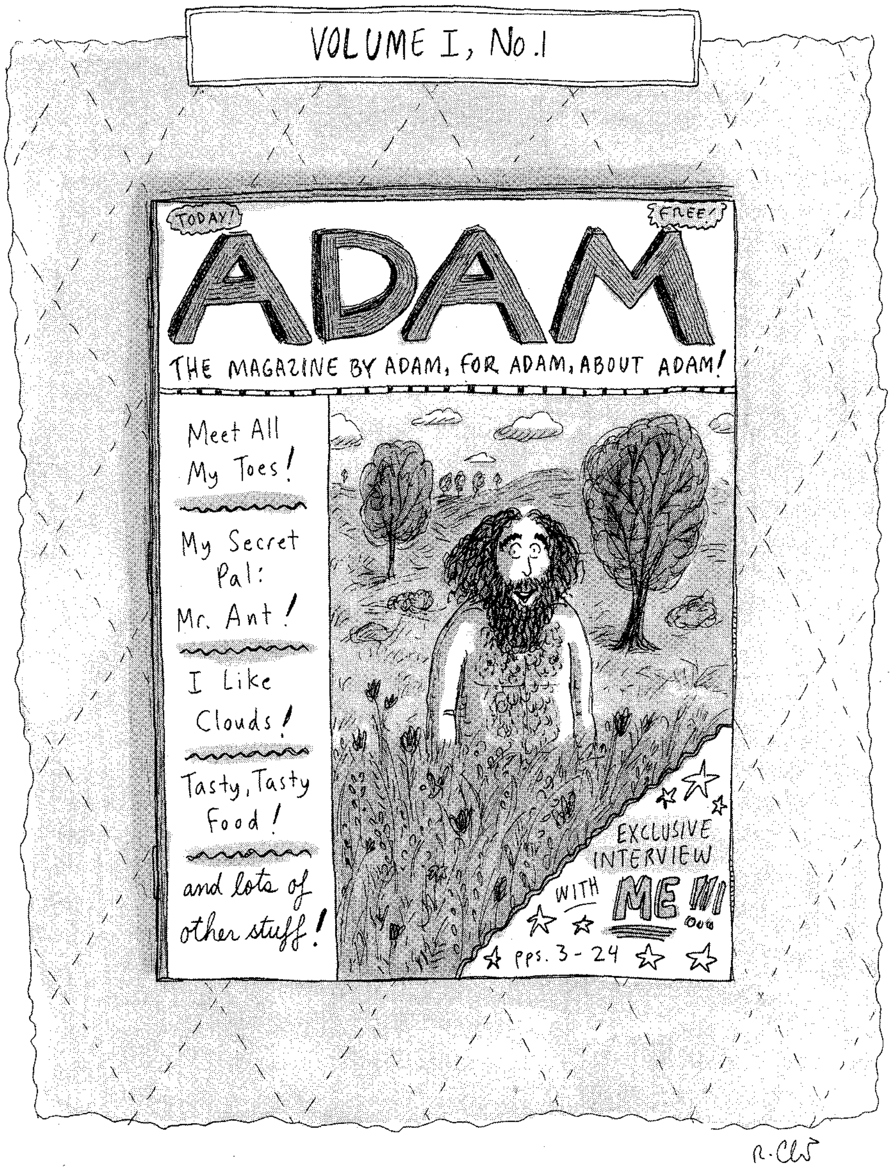
I should have given up then. That would have been the sensible thing. I don't know now why I carried on. "I don't think he does," I said. "He's looking for you right now."

He smiled softly. "How do you know that?" he asked.

"My sister told me." I really was embarrassed to hear myself saying that, like a kid telling tales. I knew it was hopeless, and I wanted to stop talking and just take hold of him and lead him somewhere, into the shadows for safety, out to the Twenty Two, where he could hide under the water until the danger had passed.

"Ah." He leaned toward me, and the light from the optics shifted on his face a little, so he looked softer, less defined. "Marie is your sister."

I nodded. For a moment, I thought that I had got through to him—that my relationship to Marie had convinced him that I knew what I was talking about. For a moment, he put his head down and stared at the ground, and I thought he was thinking about what I had said. For a moment, maybe he was. I have no idea what went through his mind then, but when that moment had passed he was looking at me, smiling again, shaking his head almost imperceptibly. "Thanks for your concern," he said. "But I'll be all right." He put his glass down on the bar; it was still half full, but he left it there and started away. "Honest," he said. He seemed disappointed then, but not with Stan. He was disappointed with me, maybe because he thought this was some game I was playing, some elaborate ruse to get his attention. That was possible. He did remember the Twenty Two, and he'd noticed me in the bank; maybe he liked me, and my talking to him about such things had made him feel awkward. All this was going through my mind as he turned to leave, but there was something else, something that I couldn't have explained. I didn't register it then, not in words, but I think that was when I knew that he was already gone and that nothing anybody could have told him would have made the least difference. Because, for all the most ordinary, all the most banal reasons, he was doomed. He was an innocent, a lost cause, a stranger in the only place he had ever known, and he couldn't do anything about it. Under different circumstances, Arthur McKechnie would have been one of those people you read about in the newspaper: the schizoid boy who jumps out of a window thinking he can fly, the mad explorer who crosses the Arctic with nothing but a rucksack and a pair of crampons. He glanced back as he was going, and I could see that he knew as well as I did that there was nothing more to say, but he said it anyway. "Be seeing you," he said.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and lots of other stuff!
EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH ME!!!
pps. 3-24

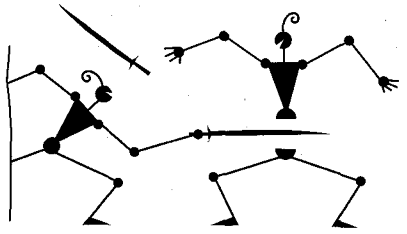
An hour later, Stan caught up with him. I'm pretty sure Stan didn't intend to hurt his own brother as badly as he did, not over a borrowed sweater. But then it wasn't his intentions that mattered. He's supposed to have told the police that he doesn't remember what he did that night, but there were about a dozen witnesses, and they all gave more or less the same account: Arthur had gone on to the Hearth after he left the Falcon, and he was walking back home when he met Stan outside the kebab place on Gloucester Road. Stan had run up, shouting and throwing punches; Arthur had just stood there, not saying anything, taking the first couple of blows as if it were some kind of game—he had a strange look on his face, people said, an odd half smile that nobody could understand, though they all saw it, and they all said the same thing afterward, that it was the smile that made Stan crazy, that odd little smile that seemed to say Arthur wasn't going to take what was happening seriously, not Stan's anger or the punches raining in on him. Some of the people who saw it all said he must have been a bit simple, just to stand there grinning like that, provoking his attacker and not doing anything to defend himself.

When it was over, Stan didn't make any real effort to get away. He stood awhile, looking around at the crowd of people who had been watching it all, as if he were surprised they hadn't done anything to stop him. People said afterward that they'd thought Arthur was dead, the way he just lay there on the pavement, all twisted around and not moving. The ones who were there at the start knew they should have done something to stop it, but they all just stood watching, about eight or ten at the beginning and then more, the entire queue from the kebab shop pouring out onto the pavement to see what was going on. None of them tried to stop the attack, and nobody tried to take hold of Stan when he turned away and walked off down the road. He wasn't running; he wasn't even in a hurry. Somebody said later that he could have been out for a stroll, except that he had blood all over his coat and hands. He didn't go toward his house, he walked the other way, and he didn't stop walking until the police picked him up, an hour later. When they took him in, apparently, he told them he hadn't meant to do it. He hadn't known what he was doing, he said. He just saw red.

After Stan was arrested, Marie wouldn't leave the house. Everybody was talking about what had happened, telling old stories about the bad things Stan had done in the past, about the drug dealing and the breaking and entering when he was in school, or that time with the Cronins and Bobby Curran in the Swan. Some of the people who had witnessed the attack—the ones who had stood by and done nothing—were even saying Stan was getting off lightly, because he should have been up for attempted murder instead of G.B.H. Meanwhile, Marie stayed off work and sat in her room with the radio on, though I doubt she ever heard it. Sometimes she came downstairs, still in her pajamas and dressing gown in the middle of the afternoon. She didn't say much, and when she did speak she would say crazy stuff. "I wish I could just disappear," she'd say. "I wish the earth would just open and swallow me up."

We all knew that something needed to be done to get her out of this depression, but nobody wanted to take the first step. So we waited. Sometimes I'd have a talk with Mum, where we would go through all the usual arguments, then one of us would say something reassuring, and we'd get on with our lives. "It'll pass," Mum would say. "She's bound to be upset, after all." Or I would point out that my sister, sitting upstairs in her dressing gown, was better off now that Stan was behind bars. "If that's what he could do to his brother," I would say, starting a sentence I would never need to finish, and waiting for the little grimace of horror that signalled her agreement. I'm not saying we didn't care. It was just that we didn't know what to do, and we couldn't really face the awkwardness of having to find out. Meanwhile, Marie grieved, and we went about our business, pretending there was nothing wrong.

They were probably doing much the same thing in the McKechnie household. The elder son had been locked up, and the younger was in a hospital ward; all the old man could do was sit indoors and hope that the world passed him by till it found something else to talk about. Even the sisters were ashamed of what Stan had done, and they had always doted on him. I heard they all went as a family to visit Arthur in the hospital, and he wouldn't even see them. He just waited till he was well enough, then he came into the bank, withdrew all the money that was left in his account, and walked back out into the gray afternoon, to God knows where. That was the last time I saw him, the day he came for his money, and he had a dark, set look to his eyes that frightened me a little. He didn't come to my position to make the withdrawal. He waited till another cashier was free and went to her. When he'd finished the transaction, he put the money in his coat pocket and muttered something under his breath; then he left, without even a backward glance. Nobody knows where he went. The best way to think of it is that he just disappeared.



The week before Christmas, it snowed again. I had gone up to the shops, and I was walking home, crossing the park on Weymouth Road, when it began, thick and fast from the moment it started falling, settling on the grass and the thin, wet shrubs around the playground. It kept falling all along the street, whiting out the gardens, lying in thick folds on the hedges, and I couldn't help but slow my pace, just to be out in all that white, watching things melt into this perpetual motion, so thick and fast by the time I got to my own front gate that I could hardly see. Everything was disappearing into the flow of it, houses and parked cars and pavement; behind me, the town was nothing but a rumor, a faint aftertaste of iron and smoke and a shadowy mass dwindling into the blizzard. This snow was completely different from the snow we'd had in November: back then, it had been all brightness and visible marks, tracks and scuffs in the white turning to plum blue and black as darkness fell, but this one was dark from the first, a new variant of dark: white as it lay, yes, but already plum blue and black as it tumbled down out of the low clouds. That first snow had been the snow in a film; this was the snow in a dream.

It was bitterly cold. I hadn't noticed when I first went out, but I felt it now, a pure cold seeping into my bones—and as the snow erased the gardens around me, I could feel this pure cold singling me out, isolating me on that street and erasing me, flake by flake, moment by moment. Marie had said she wanted to disappear, but she hadn't meant it; what she really wanted was to go back to the time before she met Stan, when life seemed full of possibilities. She didn't want to be invisible, she wanted to be seen as she saw herself, not as a character in a local news story. When she said she wished the earth would swallow her up, I knew that her shame wouldn't last, and that what had happened to her wouldn't matter much in a year's time. She would meet someone else, and she would get married and live as our mother had lived; people would think of her as somebody's wife, and then somebody's mother, and she wouldn't be invisible, ever.

But I would. I would be invisible. It

was already happening, in this relentless, quick snow; I was already disappearing, and not just disappearing into that whiteness but into everything around me. Like a ghost in a film, melting into the scenery, I was starting to vanish from my life, not by going away somewhere but just by staying where I was and doing what I had always done. Working at the bank, making dinner, reading my books, swimming at the Twenty Two in the summer, walking in the snow in the winter. It had something to do with Arthur, all this vanishing, which was ridiculous but also true. Unlike Marie, I didn't want the earth to open and swallow me up, but I knew I was starting to fade away—and it wasn't such a bad feeling, after all, to be disappearing. It wasn't a bad thing, and maybe it was all I had ever wanted. To stay where I was and disappear into the wallpaper. To want nothing—not a good job, not a husband or children. Not money or happiness. Not what my parents would have called a future. My entire life would be like those mornings when the postman comes and stands at the door, sorting through a pile of cards and letters; he thinks nobody is at home, because the house is so quiet, but someone is actually in the kitchen the whole time, listening to him fumble with the mail as she makes tea, or butters toast, not quite happy, if you want to talk about happiness, but not unhappy, either. It wasn't the kind of thing you see in films or on television, but it seemed good to me, as I stood there in the snow, vanishing imperceptibly into the life I had not chosen but would not refuse now that I knew what it was.

When I got inside, I found Marie sitting in the kitchen, watching the kettle boil. Her face was white and empty, no makeup, her hair a mess. The windows were all misted up, and it occurred to me that she had probably been sitting there awhile.

"Are you O.K.?" I asked.

She looked at me, but she didn't speak. She had been in the middle of making tea, it seemed, when I came in, but she had forgotten what she was doing, or maybe decided that she couldn't be bothered.

"Can I get you something?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I keep thinking about Stan," she said.

I nodded. "Of course you do," I said. I took a step closer. I thought about reaching out and touching her, on the arm, or the shoulder, then decided against it.

She laughed softly. "It didn't suit him," she said. "I told him when he bought it. I said right away, when he tried it on, 'It doesn't suit you, Stan.'" She looked at me. "Anyway," she said, "it was only a sweater."

I nodded again. I wanted to cross over to her and do something, but I didn't know what. After a while, I fetched tea bags down from the cupboard, and finished making the tea. Then I put four slices of bread in the toaster. It was quiet now, no talk, no sound, only the silent continuum of snow at the window—and I wanted to make her see how beautiful it was, if not always, then at least for now, but when I turned around she was asleep in her chair, her head flopped back, her arms dangling at her sides. It was like a balancing act, something she had refined over the years, and no matter how precarious it looked I knew she would not fall. I considered taking my tea through to the sitting room, but I decided to stay and keep her company. Maybe she would wake up soon, and if she did maybe she would be hungry. That would be a good sign, I thought. It was always a good sign in books when people who had been depressed began eating again. It was the beginning of something: a new life, a recovery.

I put four more slices of bread into the toaster and fetched marmalade and a brand-new pot of black-currant jam from the cupboard. When it was all ready, I carried my cup and the two plates of buttered toast to the table, one for her and one for me. I was hungry now, and I soon ate the portion I had made for myself, not bothering with the jam, just enjoying the taste of warm butter and crisp, fresh toast. It was delicious, like something from long ago, some childhood pleasure. Then, when I had finished that, I poured myself more tea, and because I was still hungry, and because I really did feel happy, sitting there in the quiet, watching the snow, I sneaked first one slice, then another, then all of the toast I had made for Marie, and ate it with the jam while it was still warm. ♦

LETTERS WE NEVER FINISHED READING

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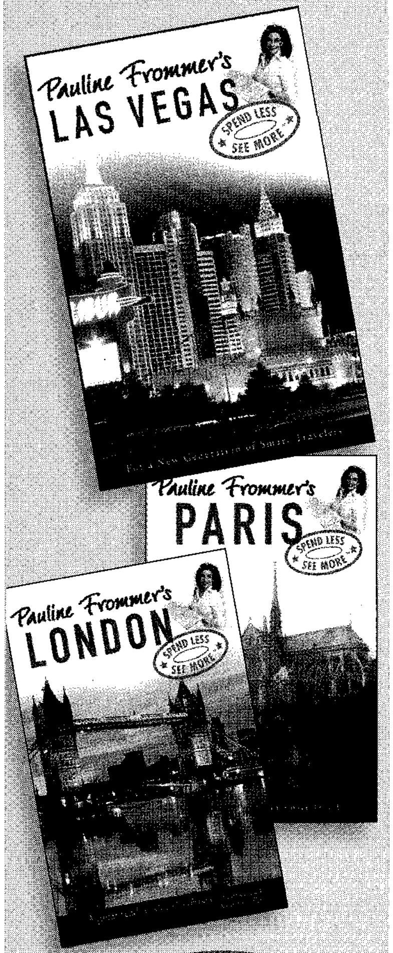

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THE CRITICS

BOOKS

THE OLD DEVIL

A life of Kingsley Amis.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

Every country's difficult literary guys are different, and you know from experience how to handle the kind you've grown up with. Reading Geoffrey Wolff's excellent biography of the truly ornery American writer John O'Hara, you sense that you could have managed him, for one night, with a mixture of office-adultery gossip and writerly mumblings about advances and sales. But when you come to the super-ornery English novelist Kingsley Amis you realize that you have no idea what you could possibly have said to get through an evening. Office gossip would be bound to hit a clunker, publishing talk would seem vulgar: this is a writer who devotes an entire chapter of his memoirs to the minor American Jewish humorist Leo Rosten in order to tear him apart, because, on the one evening Amis spent with him, Rosten (a) didn't give him enough to drink and (b) misused the English expression "local" to mean a nearby restaurant instead of a neighborhood pub. With someone like that, you just hide under the sofa, or hope you never run into him at all.

The bewildering thing is that, after having seen all his cussedness catalogued and inventoried—friends insulted, children ignored, wives betrayed, with maximum pain inflicted whenever possible—everyone on his side of the pond still regards him with backhanded affection: wonderfully wicked, magnificently rude, hilariously horrible, and so on. The orneriness becomes ornamental. (Americans do the same thing, of course, though more often with college-basketball coaches than with writers.) Then again, you can't entirely hide from Amis. In 1954, with "Lucky Jim," he more or less invented the modern English comic novel—the small-scale satiric inspection, flavored with sexual malice, that dominates English fiction from Lodge and Bradbury to Tom Sharpe and beyond. And he was part of a triangle that included the historian Robert Conquest and the poet Philip Larkin; for that one undeniably great English poet of the past half century, he was the source of a comic style, or at least an attitude, not to mention the nearest thing he ever had to a friend.

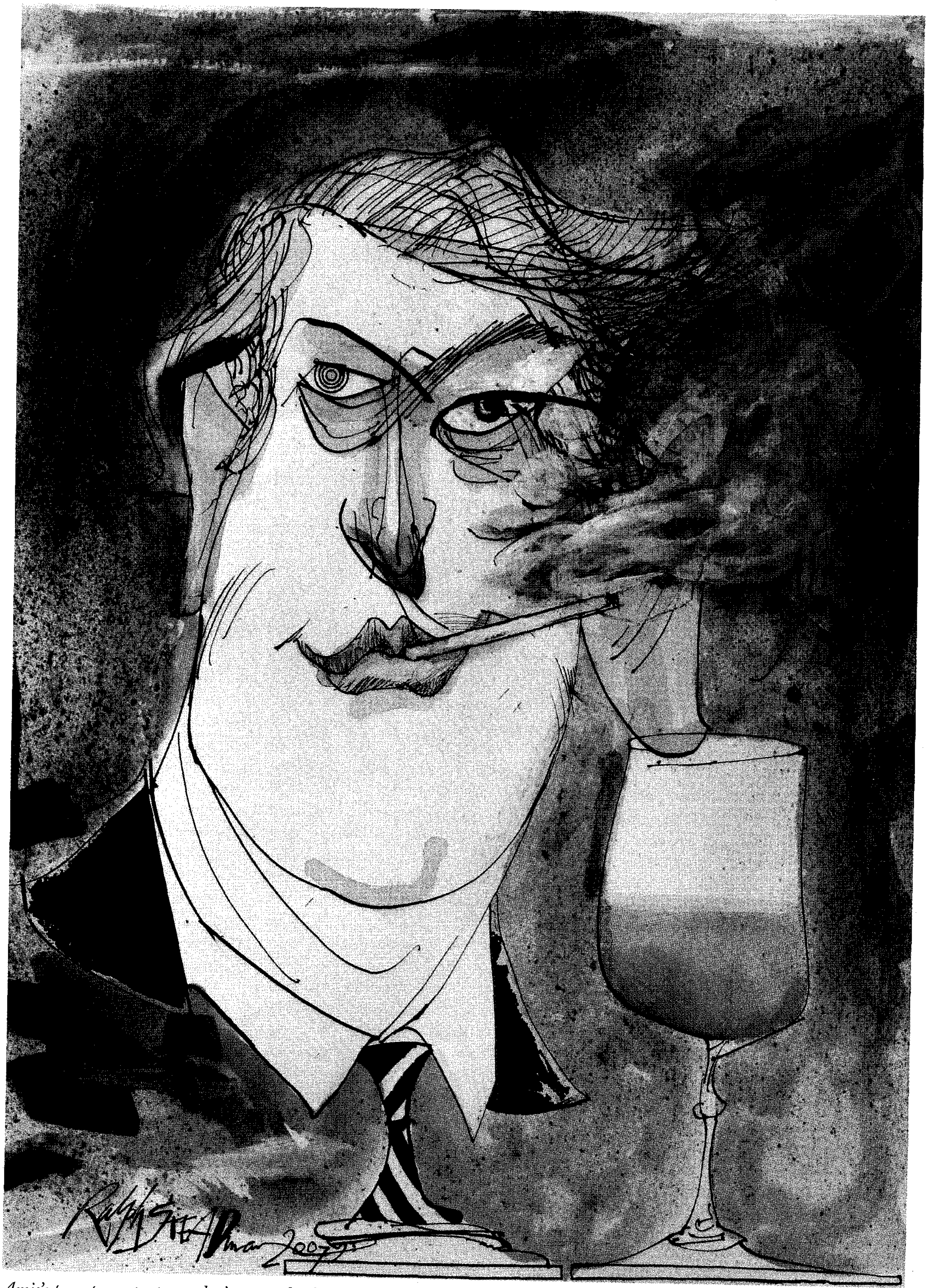
Zachary Leader's "The Life of Kingsley Amis" (Pantheon; $39.95) is a better biography than many bigger writers have had: detailed, sympathetic, unsparing without being unkind. Amis, Leader makes clear, had to work earnestly to become as bilious as he became. Born in 1922, Amis came from a tight, suburban lower-middle-class family, the accoutrements—small house, small money, paper-thin walls—closer to what Americans think of as poor, but the attitudes firmly respectable-professional; his father, whom he called "the most English human being I have ever known," was a clerk in the office of Colman's, the mustard-makers. This was probably, at least from a literary point of view, among the most oppressed classes in human history, or at least had the worst inferiority complex: never self-lionized, like the working classes, permanently snubbed and mocked by the uppers and even the upper-middles.

Amis comes fully alive when he gets to St. John's College, Oxford, in 1941, and meets his fellow-student Philip Larkin, then a stony boy with an oblique sense of humor and a gift, which Amis did not miss, as a lyric "Lawrencian" poet. Larkin, in turn, admired Amis for his cool, his natural flair with girls, and his abilities as a mimic: he could do whole movies, complete with sound effects. (Of all the forms of wit, mimicry is the one that most delights friends and lives least well on the page; its absence is one of the things that make Amis seem less fun in his Life than he must have been in his life.) Larkin and Amis also shared a passion for American jazz of the Bechet and Armstrong sort. They became lifelong intimates on the old English model—that is, dutiful correspondents who could go years without actually seeing each other, repeated dismissive and disparaging things about each other to all their acquaintances, and yet knew that, if you did have a best friend, the other guy would have to be it. Though Larkin always thought that Amis was the enviable one, for girls and fame, Amis was quick to recognize that his friend, soon exiled for life to the university library in Hull, had the greater talent. (Larkin started off playing Horatio to Amis's Hamlet; by the end of their lives, with Larkin the national poet, the roles were reversed.)

Amis drew on Larkin's counsel and his own early, bumbling experiences as a college lecturer in "Lucky Jim," which made his name, and remains the bedrock of his reputation. It tells of a few weeks in the life of Jim Dixon, a young history don, from a background like Amis's, who is on probation at a provincial university, and who gets into various kinds of misunderstandings while carrying on with two girls, one cool and pretty, one needy and plain. Postwar, the university is already becoming for Amis's characters what the Church was for Trollope's: a place where you go to make a career when you're too timid or ill equipped for any other. (Jim is trying to publish a make-work journal article titled "The Economic Influence of the Developments in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450 to 1485.")

Half a century later, the set-piece humor for which "Lucky Jim" is famous often feels surprisingly standard: the comic-climax lecture that Jim gives, misfired by drink, is right out of Gussie Fink-Nottle's prize-giving speech in P. G.

RALPH STEADMAN



Amis's target was pretense: don't pretend to like stuff you don't, his novels announce; don't pretend to be nice when you're not.

Wodehouse. What still impresses is his hero's *nerve*, which invigorated an entire generation. Where Waugh's Paul Pennyfeather, the bewildered middle-class schoolteacher hero of "Decline and Fall," was victimized throughout by the upper crust, Amis's Jim gives as good as he gets. At one point, the heroine's aesthetic painter boyfriend, the son of Jim's all-powerful department head, warns him to keep away from the girl. "I'm not having that, do you understand?" he says, and Jim replies, "It's too late not to have it. You've had it already," and not long afterward slugs him. He gets the girl, too. It is Paul Pennyfeather's revenge on the public school.

The novel's real comedy, and its originality, comes from its bracing contempt for culture and higher education—for madrigal singing, and lectures on "organic" village life, and people who make a big deal of the difference between recorders and flutes. The originality also comes from its unglossed sexual desire: girls are not there to be confused about; they're there to be wanted. Nice things are nicer than nasty ones, the book insists, and pretty girls more attractive than plain ones, and you get the pretty girls by not pretending you don't want the nice things, them included.

The comparisons with Waugh, a generation before, were natural, but Waugh, in his early satiric books, was putting an end to what remained of the Victorian-Edwardian bourgeois pieties, the secular pieties of family and education and honor and earnest purpose, if in the interest of the higher piety of Catholicism. The unreligious Amis was putting an end not to bourgeois piety, which had been roughed up enough by two wars, but to cultural pretense, which, with the pieties gone, was all that was left. Don't feel you have to pretend to like anything that you don't like, Amis announces. Don't pretend to like "The Faerie Queene" when it's the most boring thing in print. ("I can just about stand learning the filthy lingo it's written in," Larkin had written to Amis when they were undergrads studying Old English. "What gets me down is being expected to *admire* the bloody stuff.") Don't pretend to like Mozart if you don't. (Amis in fact did, but he liked the idea of a hero who didn't.) Don't pretend to be poetic when you aren't. Don't pretend to be nice when you're not.

Above all, don't pretend to have romantic feelings toward women when all you really feel is short bursts of lust and long periods of baffled resentment. "The only reason I like girls," Amis wrote in a letter to Larkin in 1953, "is that I want to fuck them, which is adolescent, cheap, irresponsible, not worth doing, a waste of time, not much fun anyway really, a needless distraction from my real vocation, destructive of any real power of understanding women which as a novelist HOOHOO should be important to me. . . . All I have to do now is stop wanting to fuck girls and I shall have the thing licked." This is the idea around which the early Amis novels—"That Uncertain Feeling," "Take a Girl Like You"—are constructed: society says be soft; your prick says be hard. You make your life from the argument between the two forces and your art from siding with the truthful one. (You can feel the blood jump in the Amis man every time the Amis woman bends over to adjust a stocking.)

There is a good play about a person who never pretends to feel what he does not; it is called "The Misanthrope." Hating pretentiousness is a bracing sentiment in "Lucky Jim," but it jumps easily to the philistinism of "Pseuds Corner" in *Private Eye*, where not just babies but whole generations of first-borns get tossed out with the bathwater. It is a very good thing to have a built-in bullshit detector, but a bad thing when the bullshit detector crowds out the rest of your brain; that's why they call it being narrow-minded. You quickly reach the stage where anything ambitious, complicated, or merely foreign gets spat on along with the things that are genuinely phony. Pretense and ambition are different words for the same thing, and a writing without pretense pretty soon becomes a literature without ambitions, content to congratulate itself on its own insularity. Blimpishness is not a step away; it is all you have left.

Amis's career as a novelist was a long declension from comic candor into mere misanthropy, and toward crude misogyny, before ending in a kind of all-over nihilism that becomes interesting again. Yet, for quite a while, not only as a novelist and poet but as a literary journalist, he swept all before him. The voice was what counted, and his, along with Kenneth Tynan's and John Osborne's, defined those years. Reading Amis's reviews from the fifties, one recognizes a modern tone, bullying and intelligent and contemptuous; soon after he started reviewing for *The Spectator*, the mandarin tone of Cyril Connolly, with its French tags and world-weary allusiveness, seemed completely dated. Amis was both modern in tone and antimodernist in feeling, a strong combination: reviewing "The Adventures of Augie March," he wrote that behind the protagonist "is Mr. Bellow, right in there pitching with his gaiety and good humour, his fizzling dialogue, his vitality," and he meant every one of the words to sting. (His voice is also surprisingly American-accented. In his memoirs, Amis writes, of a bon mot he admires, "A joke, sure, but serious and important if you think longer." Any English writer before him would surely have written "to be sure.")

Leader does a good and unexcitable job of sorting through Amis's enormously complicated sex life, which has some of the elements of a bedroom farce and some of a Beckett one-acter. Married at twenty-five to a beautiful English girl named Hilly Bardwell, who gave him three children (though, according to Leader, one, Sally, may not have been his), he staggered through a series of affairs with such promiscuity that it spurred his wife to have an open affair of her own, with the happy-go-lucky political journalist Henry Fairlie. Amis helped put an end to that with a stern, impressive letter, then celebrated his success by taking up again with another friend's wife. "I have more or less got my wife back," he wrote to Larkin. "As a consequence (though I can quite see how you can't quite see how this can be so) I have got my girl-friend back, too." Although, given these circumstances, he was less needy than his poet friend in Hull, he shared Larkin's fondness for pornography, which he and his friend Robert Conquest searched out after lunches in Soho. (Pornography was to British writers of the fifties what the Communist Party was to French writers of the time; they didn't entirely approve of it, but felt that being attached to it would keep them from being seen as mere intellectuals.)

The sexual carrousel got transplanted to America, and, specifically, to Princeton, where, in 1958 and 1959, Amis and his family spent a surprisingly happy year. (Leader describes both Amises having

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affairs with various faculty members and neighbors in various constellations.) Though Amis got a very smart book about science fiction out of his visit, he didn't get a novel finished. The irony, which Amis was perhaps too insular to intuit, was that the American students who shared his taste in drinks and sex didn't share his disdain or mistrust for traditional literature. They *loved* "The Faerie Queene." Philistinism wasn't the bracing rebellion against upper-class pretension that it was for Amis; it was the way their parents saw the world. (When Larkin, similarly, eventually made up an American Jewish academic biographer, Jake Balokowsky, for himself, he imagined that Jake would be interested in writing his life only out of academic ambition, without understanding that Jake would be doing it out of enraptured Anglophilia.)

"Sexual intercourse began/In nineteen sixty-three," Larkin wrote, "Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban/And the Beatles' first LP." The sexual revolution in Britain, when it happened, wasn't quite what Amis had been hoping for. It was by turns mystical and Blakean, then American and therapeutic, and neither appealed to him. There is a side to Amis that is forever 1956. In 1968, he wrote the first post-Fleming Bond novel, "Colonel Sun." It's disappointing. He has a package-holiday view of Greece, where it's set, and his Bond feels as uneasy abroad, or with the babes, as his other heroes, keeping his chin up and hoping to get back to England.

Even Leader seems to suggest that the novels of the mid-sixties are shaky and unsure. It is the sequence of sex-centered novels that Amis published in the late seventies and eighties—"Jake's Thing," "Stanley and the Women," and "The Old Devils"—that most deeply divide Amis's admirers and his detractors. To their fans, they are models of a disabused, cleanly written, and unsparingly Swiftian satire of mostly bad modern manners. To their non-fans, they seem like exhausting, increasingly alcoholic, right-wing rants, Basil Fawlty's idea of literature. "Jake's Thing," a novel about a man in search of a cure for impotence, satirizes, somewhat predictably, therapy groups, sociologese, and so forth. (Amis wasn't really a satirist, like Lodge and Bradbury; he was a master of comic outrage—a different thing. The violence of the indignation keeps him from holding still long enough to actually observe his targets' manners.) "Stanley and the Women," which had trouble finding an American publisher, is almost openly misogynistic. "According to some bloke on the telly the other night," the hero's best friend and drinking buddy announces at the book's end, "twenty five percent of violent crime in England and Wales is husbands assaulting wives. Amazing figure that, don't you think? You'd expect it to be more like eighty percent. Just goes to show what an easy-going lot English husbands are, only one in four of them bashing his wife." This is a view enunciated, not endorsed, of course—but you are meant at least to laugh at the outrageousness of it, as you are at similar speeches throughout the book. Amis's own domestic life, Leader explains, became touchingly bizarre as the years went on: in the early sixties, after a passionate affair, he left Hilly, with considerable heartache at breaking up his family, to marry the writer Elizabeth Jane Howard, who in the long run left him. "It was not the rows that were the worst things," she wrote to him, but "the awful sterile desert in between them." Eventually, Hilly reconciled with him, although she had a new, kindhearted upper-class husband; they even went to live with Amis, in an odd ménage à trois that ended only with Amis's death, in 1995.

The later novels all seem to be written in that awful sterile desert of non-feeling. In "Stanley and the Women," there is a subplot involving a schizophrenic son that is meant to be heartbreaking in its understatement but feels merely heartless. The trouble is not that the author sides with his characters' worst opinions—he doesn't—but that he thinks there are no sides to take, that everything is the same old cheap masquerade of desire dressed up as loyalty. Anger seems the governing emotion, at times the only emotion. Intelligent English readers insist that they laugh helplessly at the outrageous bits in later Amis—at the contemptuous descriptions of the hero's therapeutic antagonists and the constant repetition of his disdain for nearly anything contemporary. Reading the grumblings and complaints of the later Amis men, I admire the writing, recognize what people respond to, and yet my sense of the awfulness of the attitudes inhibits my laughter.

These things are partly national. Watching Larry David's equally misanthropic "Curb Your Enthusiasm"—in some respects, a very Amis-ish kind of American comedy—I find myself unable not to laugh first and be appalled by the attitudes afterward. These are hypocrisies we know by heart, where the Amis kind we learn. The Larry David character doesn't mind keeping up the nice-guy act so long as he never actually has to do anything unselfish; the Amis men expect that they will eventually have to act unselfishly, since that's what life and the world squeeze out of you, but they hate having to keep up the nice-guy act. The funniest moment on "Curb Your Enthusiasm" comes when Larry discovers, shortly after his mother dies, that he gets immense sexual and social advantage from being seen to be in mourning; people have to do what he wants. The Amis hero, in the same situation, would discover that he actually feels grief when his mother dies; it is the embarrassed display of it that makes him uneasy, and is the cause of sad laughter. One kind of comedy comes from having to show more than you can really feel, the other from the embarrassment of feeling more than you ever want to show.

What is really depressing about Amis's later novels is not how bitter they are but how *tiny*—tiny in motive, in complaint, and in understanding. One sees why writers of his son Martin's generation had almost to overpack their novels with cultural and cosmological allusions and ambitions; so much had been left out. (Leader points out that the two writers whom Amis fils most volubly reveres, Nabokov and Bellow, are the two his father most regularly despised as fancy-pants.)

Yet you can also find in the older Amis's commitment to the unprettified surface of real experience something of the orneriness of the modernists whose pretensions he so loathed. In his last good novel, "The Old Devils," which won the Booker, the details of physical aging are rendered, flatly but lucidly, in a way that recalls Beckett:

> In the bathroom across the landing he cleaned his teeth, first the twenty or so surviving in his head in one form or another and then the seven on his upper-jaw partial. This was such a tight fit that putting it back was always a tense moment; bending his knees and moving them in and out seemed to help. What with the five crowns in front, of varying manufacture

> and recency, the ensemble was a bit of a colour atlas, but at least no one was going to mistake it for snappers top and bottom. They would have to come some day—which meant not now, bless it.

In this unstartled cataloguing of aging, of the human animal as animal, Amis represents a degree zero of a certain kind of satire. You can't get colder or plainer or more modern-Swiftian than that.

He stayed angry till the end, though, and anger and sadness are not quite free choices, like a taste in chocolates. Larkin was every bit as mean and miserable an old man as Amis, but, in his poetry, at least, he blamed no one but himself for being so: his sadness was self-made, and had the authority of accurate appraisal. And Larkin was, in his own thorny way, essentially a sincere and sentimental writer. At the end of "An Arundel Tomb," he writes that the joined hands of the ancient stone husband and wife prove "Our almost-instinct almost true/What will survive of us is love"—and the lines work because they are at once so sadly qualified and so genuinely held.

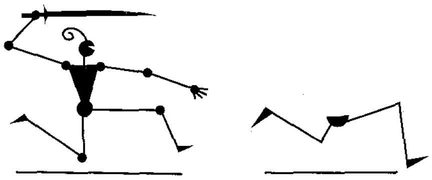
Oddly, by the end of Leader's book, you don't wish Amis any way except the way he was. People who knew him well testify to an allure that penetrated even the most miserable periods. Although you are sometimes stunned that his friends just sat there through the Fawltyish monologues, they did so for a reason. Intelligence allied to honesty allied to wit is a powerful charm. Like Waugh, Amis was emotionally crippled and weird; he was also able to dramatize, sporadically but with remarkable fullness, what had crippled him and all the ways he had been crippled. In the Stephen Frears movie "The Queen," the Royal Family is represented by the single stag, at bay and soon to be brought down, and we are meant to understand that, though insufferably pigheaded and emotionally stunted, still the old-style screwed-up English folks are possessed of a kind of cultural authenticity and dignity that the happily Americanized Blair family can only aspire to. A better-adjusted culture can also seem like a dully anesthetized one. Glad though you may be that you never had to meet Amis, it's hard, as you crawl out from under the sofa at the end of his Life, not to feel a little sorry that there will be no more of his kind. Whatever the next generation of ornery Englishmen is like, they won't be like that. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

Poetry

New and Selected Poems (1965-2006), *by David Shapiro (Overlook; $21.95).* Shapiro is usually thought of as a New York School poet, but from the evidence of this selection it would probably be more accurate to call him a Greater New York School poet. His metropolis radiates outward to comprehend Weequahic Park and the Palisades, and his aleatory, portent-free sophistication seems confident enough to accommodate primitive, endearing, and frankly tender tropes and situations, as when a poet faces an ailing mother or a growing son. A perennial drama in this volume is that of an erudite and restlessly modernizing mind confronting pains and peculiarities that no amount of urbanity can assuage. "The lachrymal apparatus remains," Shapiro says at one point, and he orchestrates its operations with irony and honesty. The effect is of unforeseen intimacy at the heart of abstraction.

Without Title, *by Geoffrey Hill (Yale; $16).* For much of Hill's five-decade career, his forbiddingly allusive and elliptical style, his sometimes peevish tone, his interest in English church history, and his rapt pastoralism have made him an unfashionable figure, but also a highly individual one. His latest collection exhibits typical erudition: who else would name-drop the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner or describe Jimi Hendrix as an "exquisite player of neumes" ("neumes" being an archaic form of musical notation)? Though the method is a magpie one, the impression that emerges is of absolute control and single-mindedness. And while Hill's outlook can seem willfully bleak ("Dead or alive / we sojourn in the world's refuge and abattoir") there is genuine grace in his descriptions of natural beauty, of wild clematis or summer storms, or the weathered surface of a Worcestershire church tower, "Sage-green through olive to oxidized copper."



Even the Hollow My Body Made Is Gone, *by Janice N. Harrington (B.O.A.; $15.50).* Harrington, an award-winning author of children's books, sets her first poetry collection mainly in Alabama during the civil-rights era. Her rich, colloquial poems, drawing on both folklore and science, are paeans to a weary but tenacious black family and their journey north through "a night as wide as the River Jordan." Certain family members reappear throughout the book—"Webster tall/and flaming with red hair like the burning/bush"—as do symbols. "Cast iron" invokes both the comforting hearth and the shattering memories of slavery: "Their beds were cast/iron and so too the thighs wrapped round/his hips." When the poems themselves seem less pioneering than the spirit they evoke, their scope and empathy largely compensate: "we forgive/our fathers their broken flights: sometimes."

Citizen Of, *by Christian Hawkey (Wave; $14).* The title of this collection serves as a challenge to readers in a political climate where alarmism seems to alternate with complacency. "Hour with One Hand Inserted in a Time of War" asks, "Should we/stand guard at the Level of One Hand Raised/to Block the Lemon Seed of the Sun/or should we push off, down the tunnels,/dig a hole in the side of a wall & wait?" Hawkey effectively conjures a contemporary scene that seems peaceful, even while "Landmines whisper sideways underground." Everyone, he says, is "no longer/a crow's nest but a cluster of nests,/urban, suburban, some with turbans." Humor, stemming more from exasperation than from delight, eases immersion into the tight-knit poems, but amid the laughter a loud alarm rings: "At least the bird's brain was focused/on something."

THE THEATRE

LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

Eugene O'Neill and David Harrower on the failures of the heart.

BY HILTON ALS

When Eugene O'Neill finally finished "A Moon for the Misbegotten," in 1943, at the age of fifty-five, his writing life was almost over. Suffering from the debilitating effects of Parkinson's disease and submerged in gothic-tinged memories of his family's sorrowful past, O'Neill wrote "A Moon for the Misbegotten" two years after completing his masterwork about family drama, "Long Day's Journey Into Night." He was not, in the end, fond of "Moon." In fact, the play seemed to annoy him. Inscribing the published text to his third wife, he wrote, "To darling Carlotta . . . This token of my gratitude . . . a play she dislikes, and which I have come to loathe." It's not clear why O'Neill had less affection for "Moon" than he did for his two other great final works. ("The Iceman Cometh" was completed in 1939.) Less complicated in its staging than "Iceman" and "Long Day's Journey," "A Moon for the Misbegotten" is the distillation of O'Neill's art: a melancholy howl tempered less by grotesque humor (though the play offers that, too) than by the understanding that love cannot always save a troubled man's soul. Perhaps it was just that "A Moon for the Misbegotten" mirrored too closely O'Neill's own deficiencies in love.

The relatively actionless drama (now in revival at the Brooks Atkinson) is set in an unnamed Connecticut town, and takes place over the course of two days in September, 1923. A faded blue sky hangs above a weather-beaten, ramshackle farm. We see a small, lopsided house and a water pump; no grass grows in the dusty earth. As the play begins, the motherless, Irish-American Josie Hogan (Eve Best) is insisting that her brother, Mike (Eugene O'Hare), wash his face before he runs away from home—thereby escaping their penny-pinching, emotionally withholding father, Phil (Colm Meaney). Josie feels more than justified in slipping Mike some money that she has stolen from the old man. Like her brother, she works on the farm for little pay, let alone encouragement. And, like many unloved children, she tries to compensate for her parents' failures: she does for others what no one has ever done for her.

O'Neill describes Josie as "almost a freak—five feet eleven in her stockings," and weighing "around one hundred and eighty" pounds. He goes on, "She is more powerful than any but an exceptionally strong man. . . . But there is no mannish quality about her. She is all woman." The description brings to mind another lovesick Amazon created in the nineteen-forties: Miss Amelia, in Carson McCullers's short novel "The Ballad of the Sad Café." Unfortunately, in casting the slim-hipped and lovely Eve Best in the part, the director, Howard Davies, has sacrificed something that is essential to our understanding of Josie: she is meant to be strong enough to take over her father's farm, if she chooses to. It isn't weakness but goodness—her wish to be a surrogate wife to her father—that keeps her from challenging his authority and control. Best is a fine actress—a tough and vulnerable Olive Oyl, with a wily, sad face that would be perfect for cinema—but she is poorly cast as Josie. She captures some of the femininity of O'Neill's earth mother, but her physical attributes make her a far better match for another of O'Neill's trapped heroines, Anna Christie. (One can imagine her flourishing, too, in Chekhov's plays, as a young woman teetering on the brink of modernity.) Admittedly, my view of Best's deficiencies here may be colored by my having seen how well the late Colleen Dewhurst filled the role, in José Quintero's astonishing 1973 Broadway production. It was easy to imagine Dewhurst, with her full figure, her whiskey-smoky voice, and her thick black hair, digging for potatoes and suckling the needy, all while

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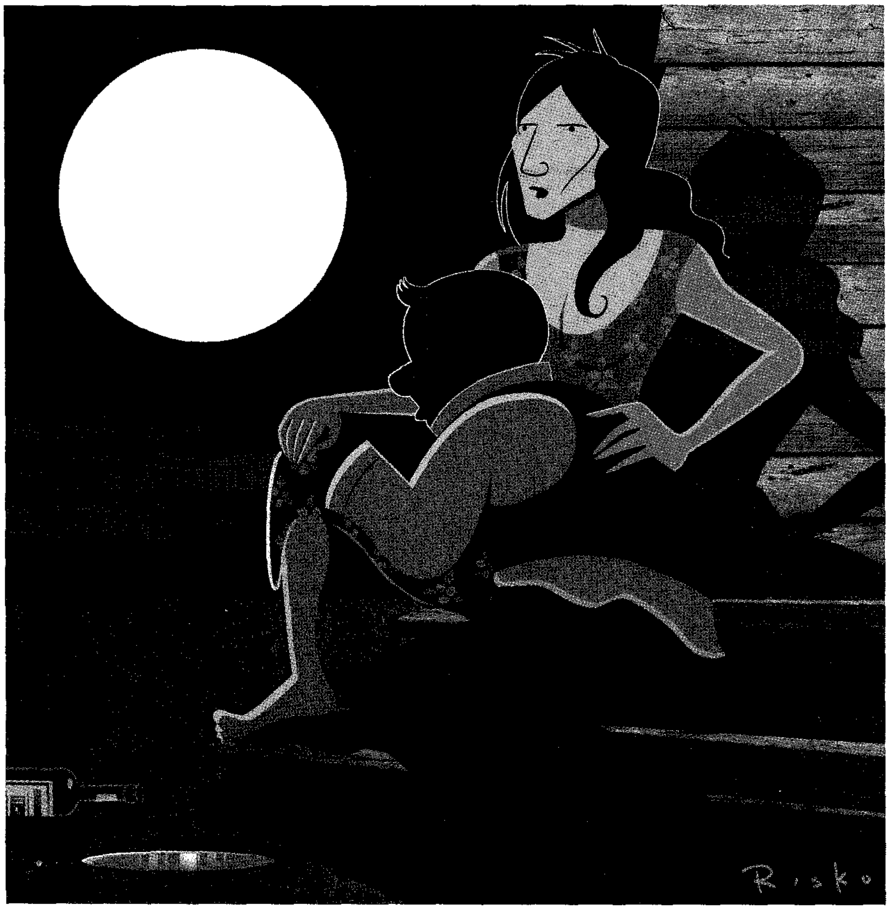
keeping an eye out for the alcoholic, witty, and broken-down James Tyrone, Jr. (played here by Kevin Spacey).

Jim lives up the road from Josie and her father. He is of a different class—a theatrical artist of sorts, with an excess of time and privilege on his hands. The Tyrones, of course, were the focus of "Long Day's Journey Into Night." (Although we never met the Hogans in the earlier play, they were spoken of there—as "the Shaughnessys": Mr. Shaughnessy was a tenant farmer for James, Sr.) The unmarried and unmoored Jim we encounter in "A Moon for the Misbegotten" is the only Tyrone to remain on the property that his father bought with his earnings as a touring actor. (Jim reveals that his brother—a character that O'Neill based on himself—is now married, with a child.) Dressed in a linen suit and waistcoat, Jim is too spoiled and self-absorbed to be entirely nefarious. Bereft of parents and brother, he passes time with the Hogans because they're the only audience from the old days that he has left. Letting go of them would mean letting go of the pain of the past. And Jim is always just drunk or sick enough not to register the ways in which Josie and Phil allow him to reëxperience his former family life—with Phil in the role of his tightfisted father and Josie, who has stayed on the farm while her three brothers ran off, reflecting something of himself.



Star-crossed neighbors: Kevin Spacey and Eve Best in "A Moon for the Misbegotten."

ROBERT RISKO

O'Neill's strength here is the insight he offers into Irish class distinctions. Jim's father may have been an immigrant, but he catapulted himself—and thus his family—out of the bog and into a cultural stratosphere. Josie wears her resentment of Jim's "fancy" ways like the wilting flower that she pins to her hair as she waits for him to show up for a date. When Jim does eventually arrive, he cannot express his feelings for her physically because he regards the body—the female body in particular—with anger and horror. For him, every woman is a potential tart, just waiting to infect him with her need. He prefers to bargain for love, not bask in it. This is a role that Kevin Spacey should have taken on long ago. (This production transferred to Broadway from the Old Vic, in London, where Spacey is the artistic director.) In project after project, Spacey has coasted on his supercilious persona. It has always seemed that he was hiding something behind his smart-aleck tone; in movies especially, he often speaks his lines slowly, with the cadence of a performer who knows—and wants us to know—that he's smarter than his material. But Spacey has found a challenge in O'Neill, whose main object as a writer was to show that lies can not only cripple the psyche but also completely undo the transformative effect of love. What one would ordinarily find distracting about Spacey—a dramatic ego that shows little regard for the other performers (until this production, I always associated his grandness with a kind of contempt)—does not have a chance to take root here, thanks, in part, to Eve Best. Like Josie with Jim, she struggles to keep Spacey engaged on a deeper level, experiencing the play as though it were happening not only to him but to the other characters as well. I hope that the great Thespis will reward her for this with a role that uses her own exceptional skills to better effect.

"Blackbird," the winner of the Olivier for Best New Play in Britain this year, is a confrontation drama. You know the deal: someone shows up to confront someone else about an injustice that he committed in the past. Then they talk. And talk. And talk. And gradually we come to understand that the injured party was complicit in his own abuse. This is exactly the trajectory we follow for ninety, intermissionless minutes in David Harrower's play (now a Manhattan Theatre Club production at City Center), which bored me rigid, despite its incendiary subject matter. Because Harrower has filched the play's story from the headlines—What is childhood sexuality? Can children be seductive? And do adults scar them forever if they fall for that seduction?—sitting in the audience is less like going to a play than like participating in a new form of journalism: the ticker-tape drama. You can't blame the actors—Jeff Daniels and Alison Pill—or the director, Joe Mantello, but you can certainly be annoyed with Harrower for the cheap shot he takes at our expense. He may still develop into a writer of note, but all "Blackbird" will do is make him famous. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

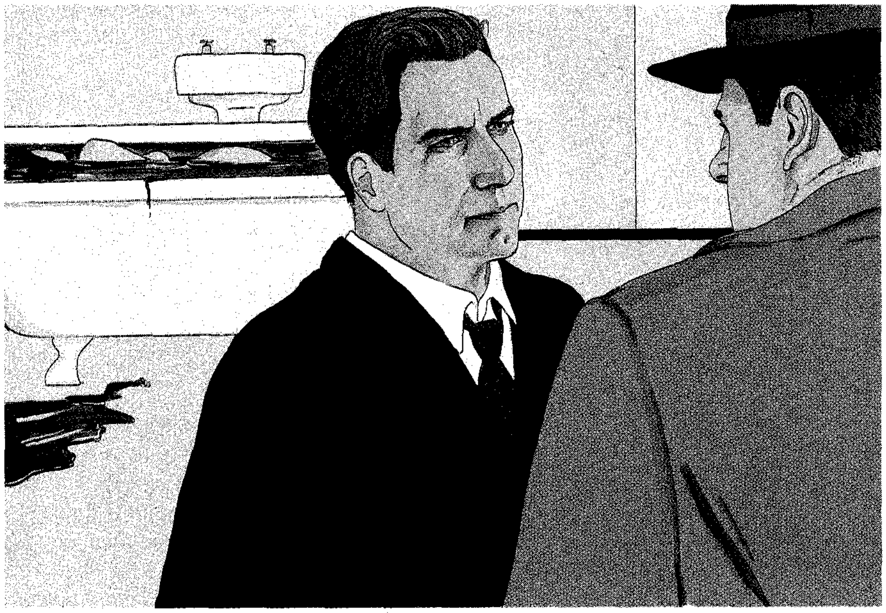
DEARLY DEPARTED

"Lonely Hearts" and "Year of the Dog."

BY DAVID DENBY

When the morose con man Raymond Fernandez (Jared Leto) puts on a thick dark toupee and a white suit, his eyes come alive and he turns into a fantasy Latin lover—a pocket-size Cesar Romero, complete with pencil-line mustache and dazzling smile. Ray, one of two murderers in the superb nineteen-forties true-crime story "Lonely Hearts," finds his prospective victims in the personals sections of newspapers. He corresponds with the women for months, offering tenderness and poetry before meeting, romancing, fleecing, abandoning, and, in some cases, murdering them. How can Ray make out so well? Like many dedicated male narcissists, he's initially aroused not by the women but by their interest in him, but then, in return, he offers good value—he's all attention, and tireless. The hustle becomes even more perverse when Ray links up with a former nurse, Martha Beck (Salma Hayek), an eruptive little beauty who poses as Ray's sister and accompanies him and his latest woman everywhere. Martha, it seems, believes that she and Ray are having the love affair of the ages; she's jealous of Ray's attentions to the others, and eventually she loses patience with the scam and does in his girlfriends herself.

The real-life Fernandez and Beck rolled around Long Island and Michigan for a couple of years, and may have murdered as many as seventeen people. In the movie, the doings of this sanguinary pair—a case of *amour fou* at the level of moral cretinism—are followed by another couple, two Long Island homicide detectives. When the movie begins, Detective Elmer Robinson (John Travolta) is in a state of deep freeze. His wife, leaving him and a son behind, committed suicide several years earlier without giving any reason, though we get the impression that Elmer's taciturnity about his sordid job left her in the dark. Withdrawing into desk work and silence, Elmer, despite the love of a terrific woman (Laura Dern), has become a lonely heart, too. But he's pulled back into active duty by what looks like another suicide—a young Long Island war widow lying naked in a bloody tub of water. When Robinson realizes that the suicide has been staged (the widow's bank account has been cleaned out), he's stirred by pity and perhaps by memories of his wife's unhappiness, and the chase begins. He's accompanied by his old partner, Detective Charles Hilderbrandt (James Gandolfini), who admires him, urges him on, and, in a loquacious, needling, gleefully profane way, takes care of him.



John Travolta and James Gandolfini in a nineteen-forties true-crime story.

LARA TOMLIN

The movie's writer-director, Todd Robinson, who has made arts documentaries and written feature movies ("White Squall") in the past, gives equal narrative attention to the criminals and the cops, with Hilderbrandt, looking back from the time of Fernandez's and Beck's executions at Sing Sing, in 1951, narrating the events in the juicy crime-fiction lingo of the period. Gandolfini speaks the gaudy patois with tremendous relish, and he also gets to pronounce the movie's sober conclusion: "We are not going to make a difference," he says to Elmer. That is, they can stop these two maniacs, but they can't stop crime. And Hilderbrandt sees what the work does to his partner. It turns out that Todd Robinson has a personal understanding of the ways policemen suffer from what they do. Elmer Robinson was the director's grandfather, and his family has always believed that the squalid features of the case—the corpses, the helpless women—played havoc with his already shaken morale and ended his career as a detective.

Over the years, the Fernandez-Beck rampage has received almost as much attention from filmmakers as the frequently exhumed Black Dahlia case. The Mexican director Arturo Ripstein made an apparently relentless, darkly comic version of the tale, "Deep Crimson," in 1996, but the best-known version is "The Honeymoon Killers," from 1970, written and directed by Leonard Kastle and starring Tony Lo Bianco and Shirley Stoler. Shot in a flatly lit black-and-white, "The Honeymoon Killers" is obvious and often inept, but the low-rent cruddiness of it—the B-movie, bottom-drawer dramaturgy—is enlivened by flourishes of stylistic audacity, and the movie has long exerted a kind of malign fascination. Kastle never leaves the two lovers. We are trapped within their loony obsessions right to the end.

Robinson acknowledges our interest

in the tawdry side of the case. He begins the movie with tabloid photographs of dead bodies sprawled in their own blood, images that yield a brutally sardonic street irony: these were once living people; now they are nothing but messes. Interspersed with the photographs, however, are domestic scenes (Robinson's wife beating an egg) and the honeyed sound of a Mabel Scott jazz vocal. "Lonely Hearts" adds the dimensions—of everyday life, of moral accountability—that nastily foreshortened exploitation movies like "Honeymoon Killers" leave out. Shot in beautiful browns and grays, the picture has a slightly tinted look that brings us closer to the past emotionally—though time plays games with the associations we bring to period details. To our eyes, the unsmiling homicide detectives, in their long coats and gray hats, have the grim, heavy look of forties gangsters, while the killers, in white or beige, look like happy tourists. But that's no more than an appearance. The story of Fernandez and Beck may be grotesque comedy, but Todd Robinson tells it straight, without flinching from its piteousness, horror, or banality. Quarrelling over money like any other lower-middle-class couple, the two never break free into the kind of wild exhilaration that, say, Bonnie and Clyde enjoyed. As a thick-maned stud, Jared Leto is magical—both cheap and irresistible—but when his bald spot and receding hairline are showing, he's just another chain-smoking, henpecked husband. Salma Hayek is incomparably prettier than the actual Martha Beck, who weighed more than two hundred pounds and had the heavy jaw of a prison guard, yet Hayek scars the character with her special bravura—she demands what she wants with such intensity that she seems quite mad. Hayek stares down Leto, stares down the camera; she's not much of an actress, but she imbues Beck with pathological rage.

Gandolfini provides an entertaining backdrop of acid chatter for Travolta, who gives a nearly silent performance. His lips pursed, his black hair standing almost straight up in the five-dollar-haircut style of the era, Travolta says only what is necessary to say to keep the investigation moving and to hold on to his estranged son and exasperated girlfriend. Todd Robinson both honors and deplores the stoicism of his grandfather's generation, in which men refused to share what they were feeling with the people who loved them. Travolta, however, has always been good at letting his emotions pour through his eyes, and we see what's being repressed. In all, I'm not sure I've ever seen anything quite like "Lonely Hearts." The movie is explicit but sombre, bloody but appalled. What Robinson has done is nothing like David Fincher's recent "Zodiac," in which the unending pursuit of the killer—the obsession itself—is what really matters. Robinson wants justice, and he also wants emotional solace, though he knows his family's troubled history far too well to believe that the first can ever really provide what's needed of the second.

In "Year of the Dog," Pencil, a lovely little beagle living in Southern California, dies when he eats something he shouldn't have, and his grief-struck owner, Peggy (Molly Shannon), slowly falls apart. She screws up at her job as an executive assistant, brings home vicious and abandoned pooches, takes up the cause of animal activism, tries to get everyone to adopt a pet, and then, after a while, withdraws from the world. This first movie directed by Mike White, who wrote "The Good Girl" and "School of Rock," is devoted to the fixations not only of pet owners but of the corporate executives, man-obsessed friends, and parents in Peggy's life. White poses his monomaniacs front and center with a lot of space around them and lets the actors (including Laura Dern and Peter Sarsgaard) speak their semi-satirical lines without interruption. He's trying for an effect of deadpan portraiture, and some of his writing has a surprising kick—a few words at the end of a seemingly conventional line that reveal the speaker's sweetly neurotic soul. Still, most of the movie is a trial to sit through. Molly Shannon, formerly of "Saturday Night Live," presents to the camera a mask of comedy—a long pale face, a needle nose, and an anxious smile—but she doesn't have the emotional range or depth to carry a full-length movie. She's undermined further by White's inability to decide whether Peggy is a heroine or a drip. It turns out that White's satirical impulses are at war with other parts of his temperament. What starts as a teasing look at people who can focus on only one thing in their lives (animals, money, children, a lover) turns into a soft embrace of everybody and everything. The movie's meaning seems to be: we're all crippled in some way, so just live with it—celebrate it, even. That isn't satire; it's moss-brained sentiment that turns "sensitivity" into a dimly dejected view of life. ♦

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VOLUME LXXXIII, NO. 9, April 23, 2007. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for five combined issues: February 19 & 26, June 11 & 18, July 9 & 16, September 3 & 10, and December 24 & 31) by Condé Nast Publications, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: The Condé Nast Building, 4 Times Square, New York, NY 10036. Louis Cona, vice-president and publisher; Jamie Engel, associate publisher; Alatia Bradley, advertising director; Karen Quinn-Panzer, advertising director; Melissa McCarthy Strome, advertising director; Judy Safir, director of finance and business operations; Daniella Wells, executive director marketing and strategic planning; Janine Silvera, executive director of creative services; Jacqueline Cinguina, director of integrated marketing; Steve Porter, creative director/advertising; Ellen Reid, creative services director; Lynn Oberlander, general counsel. Condé Nast Publications: S. I. Newhouse, Jr., chairman; Charles H. Townsend, president and C.E.O.; John W. Bellando, executive vice-president and C.O.O.; Debi Chirichella Sabino, senior vice-president and C.F.O.; Jill Bright, executive vice-president/human resources. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001. Canada Post: return undeliverable Canadian addresses to P.O. Box 874, Station Main, Markham, ON L3P 8L4.

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Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Tom Cheney, must be received by Sunday, April 22nd. Finalists in the April 9th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the May 7th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

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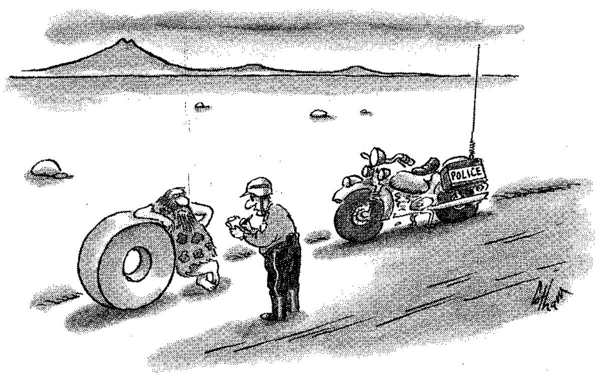
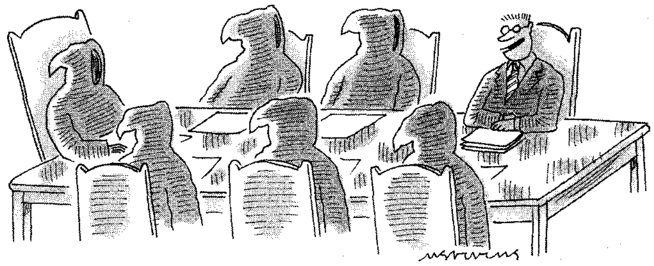


"Yeah, yeah—and I invented the ticket."
Scott Gerschwer, Redding, Conn.



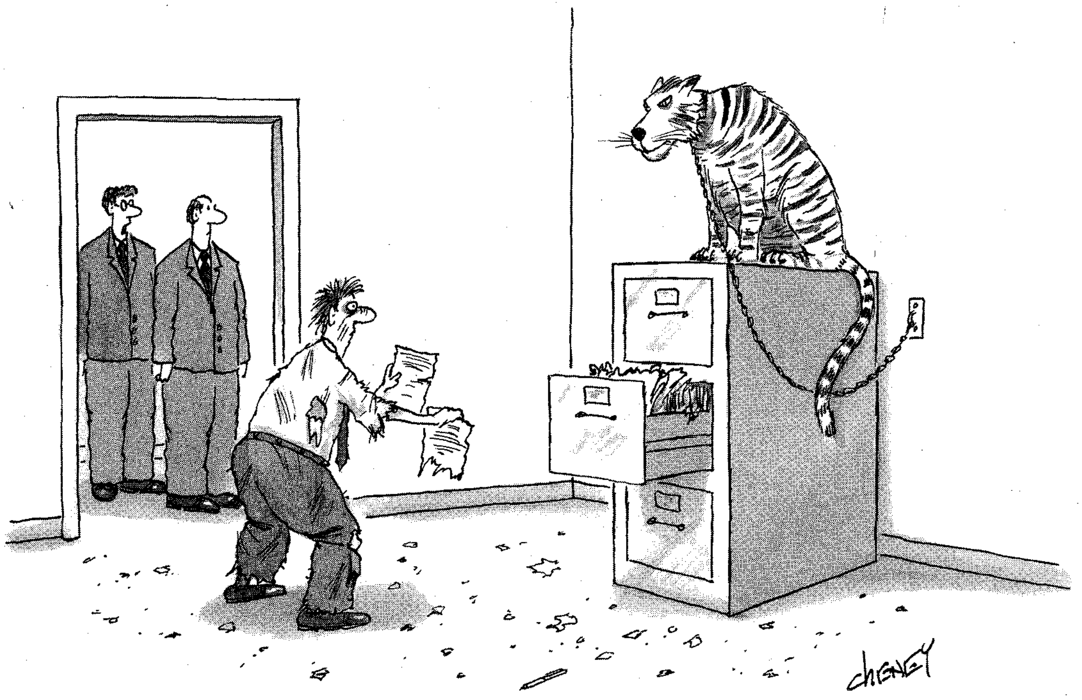
THE FINALISTS

"Marketing sent me. I'm the new, fresh face of death."
Marcus Mastracco, Rotterdam, N.Y.

"Perkins here, representing taxes."
Andrew Kosztyo, Daytona Beach, Fla.

"Well, I thought it was funny."
Ian Lambert, Whitefish Bay, Wis.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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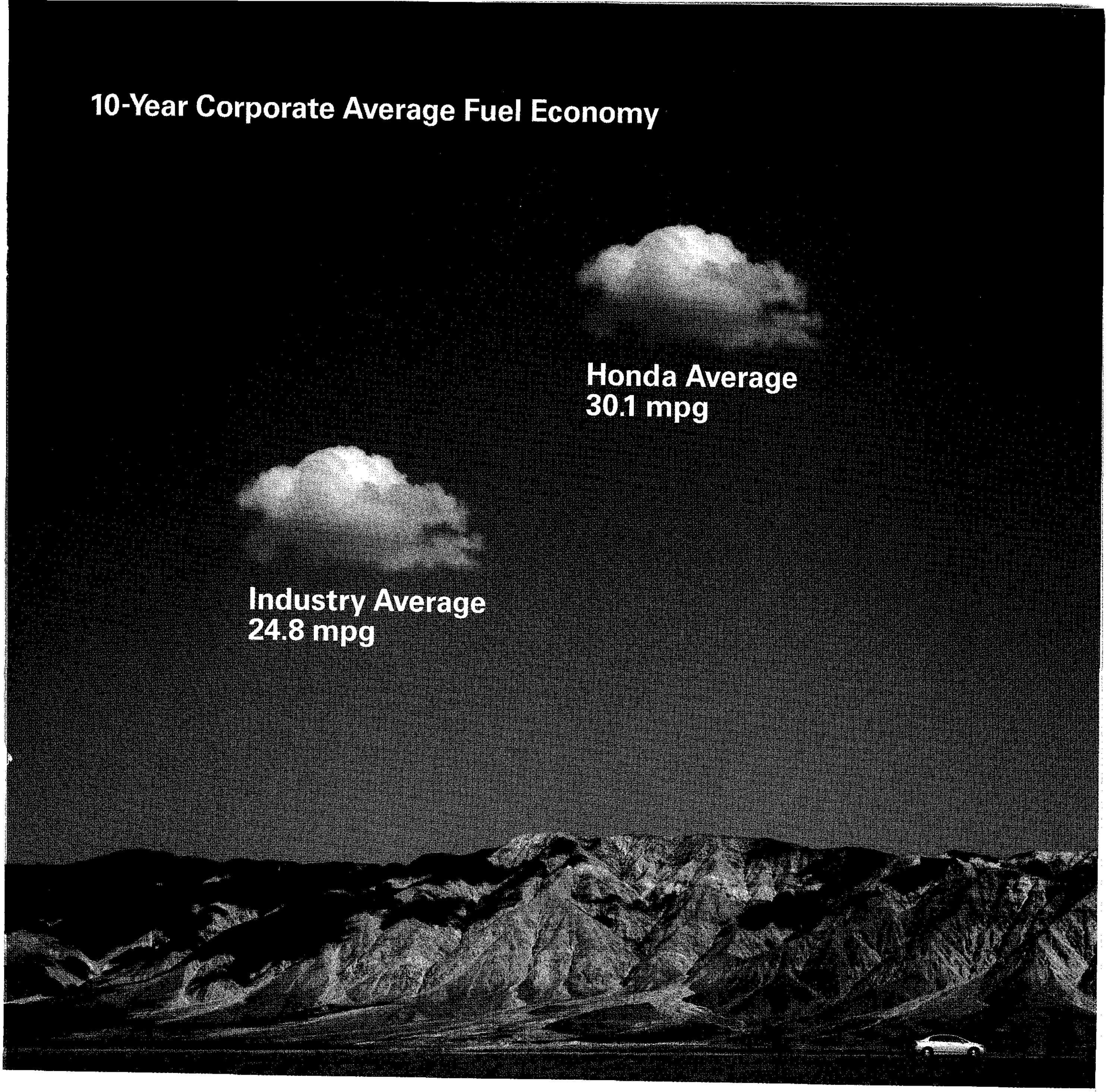
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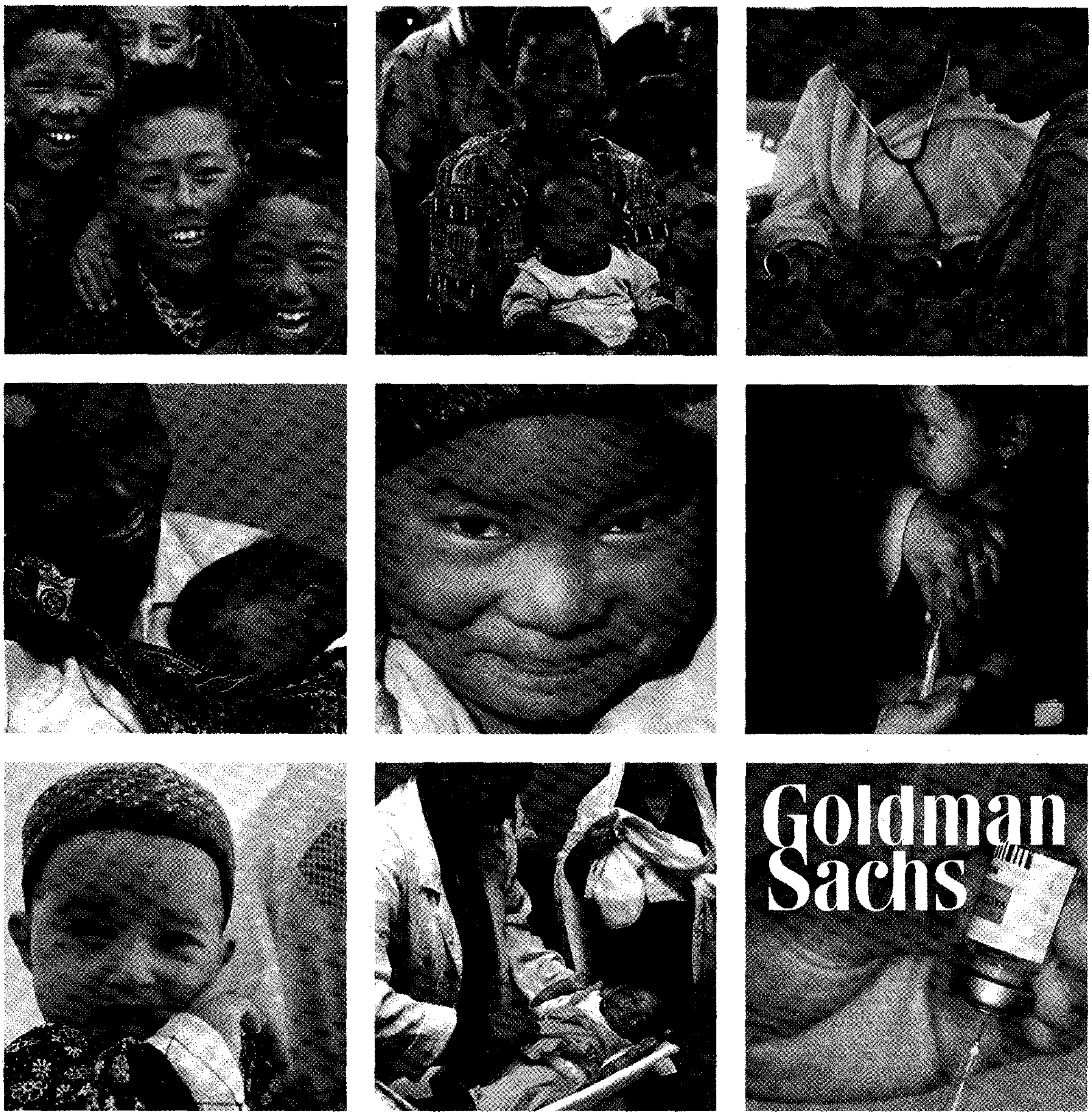

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